The Spanish Caribbean, 1492–1550 FREE

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Summary

The arrival of Christopher Columbus in the northern Caribbean with three Spanish ships in October 1492 marked the beginning of continuing European contact with the Americas. With his second voyage of 1493 permanent European occupation of the Caribbean began, with enormous consequences for the peoples and ecology of the region. Failing to encounter the wealthy trading societies that Columbus had hoped to find by reaching Asia, Europeans in the Caribbean soon realized that they would have to involve themselves directly in organizing profitable enterprises. Gold mining in the northern islands and pearl fishing in the islands off the coast of Tierra Firme (present-day Venezuela) for some years proved enormously profitable but depended on Spaniards' ability to exploit indigenous labor on a large scale. The imposition of the Spanish *encomienda* system, which required indigenous communities to provide labor for mining and commercial agriculture, and the large-scale capture and transportation of Native Americans from one locale to another wrought havoc among the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean and circum-Caribbean, resulting in high mortality and flight. Spaniards in the islands soon sought to supplement indigenous labor by importing African slaves who, in the early 16th century, became a significant if not always easily controlled presence in the region.

From the earliest years the Spanish Caribbean was a complex, dynamic, and volatile region characterized by extensive interaction and conflict among diverse groups of people and by rapid economic and institutional development. Although the islands became the launching grounds for subsequent Spanish moves to the nearby mainland, throughout the 16th century and beyond they played a crucial role in sustaining Spain's overseas empire and integrating it into the larger Atlantic system.

Keywords: Taíno, Columbus, gold mining, pearl fishing, encomienda, slavery, Genoese, Portuguese

First Contact

In October 1492, a group of Europeans, mostly originating in the southern part of the Spanish kingdom of Castile and led by an Italian, Christopher Columbus, arrived in the Caribbean. They found themselves among peoples previously unknown to them who lived in and moved around an archipelago of islands that formed a crescent some 2,000 miles long. The islands varied considerably in size, topography, climate, history, ethnicity, and resources. Some of them, above all the large ones of the northern Caribbean, were

home to substantial populations, characterized by complex forms of sociopolitical organization and intensive agriculture. Others were sparsely populated; indeed the land mass of what are known today as the Greater Antilles (Hispaniola, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Jamaica) constitutes 80 percent of that of the islands as a whole. Some islands of the southern Caribbean were closely tied to the neighboring mainland by ethnicity and mobility, and all the islands and their peoples were shaped by the maritime milieu that brought migrants, raiders, and traders to their shores and fostered an ease of movement that allowed for the creation and maintenance of kinship ties and the dispersion of cultural elements across the porous borders formed by the surrounding seas.

Although debate among archaeologists and other scholars over the ethnic and linguistic composition of island populations is ongoing, strong consensus has emerged that at the time of contact the Caribbean was home to several groups speaking languages that probably were related but not necessarily mutually intelligible. Beginning around 6000 years ago, over the course of several thousand years people arrived in parts of the archipelago in waves, with the earliest migrants probably coming from Central America and subsequent ones from the South American mainland.[1] Certainly the groups living in the islands in 1492 exceeded in number and complexity the reductionist dichotomy between friendly Taínos and hostile, possibly cannibalistic Caribs that quickly came to shape Europeans' treatment of and attitude toward the peoples they encountered, even though at least some Europeans understood that the Caribbean's ethnolinguistic situation was more complicated than the simple categorization of groups as friends and enemies. Yet the dichotomy proved politically and ideologically useful, justifying the ravaging of some populations to draw off large numbers of captives to be relocated elsewhere and used for labor and the subjugation of others. This destructive activity continued long after the Castilian Queen Isabel repudiated Columbus's initial decision in face of the apparent lack of other readily exportable commodities to send captives from early campaigns on Hayti—renamed La Isla Española, today Hispaniola—to be sold as slaves in Spain. Isabel insisted that as her vassals the people of Hispaniola could not be enslaved. That judgment, however, did not preclude the imposition of other forms of labor exploitation, and Spaniards readily found ways to justify taking captives who resisted Spanish domination and Christianization. Although theories of "just war" long pre-dated Iberian expansion to the Americas, in 1512 Spaniards adopted a formal proclamation called the *Requerimiento* (Requirement) that set out the terms by which native Americans were "required" to recognize the legitimacy of the Christian Church and the sovereignty of the Spanish crown as the protector of the Church. Their failure to do so provided a pretext for Spaniards to wage war and reduce recalcitrant natives to slavery.[2]

In the first decades after they arrived in the Caribbean Europeans were in closest contact with Taíno peoples on the large islands and established their main settlements and new economic enterprises among them. The term Taíno should not be understood as designating a single homogeneous group; rather, as William Keegan suggests, it incorporated a range of historical, socioeconomic, political, cultural, and linguistic patterns while also reflecting some commonalities.[3] Among the latter were chiefdoms, or *cacicazgos*, some quite large and including a number of lesser chiefdoms; the existence of sociopolitical hierarchies within communities as well as among *cacicazgos*; the construction and grouping of houses according to social hierarchies and family and kinship ties; an emphasis on matrilineal descent and matrilocality; the practice of settled, varied and in some places intensive forms of agriculture (irrigation, terracing) that included cultivation of yucca, maize, *aje*, fruit and cotton; dependence on marine and riverine species for most of their animal protein; the construction and use of ball courts and plazas, some predating the Taíno; and sophisticated carving in wood and stone.

Although Columbus's expectation of encountering wealthy trading societies by sailing west from Europe to reach Asia went unfulfilled, after contact the Caribbean continued to be the scene of constant movement, exchange, and interaction, often in new forms. Its distinctive milieu shaped life and society as European and African transplants established themselves in the islands. They became accustomed to the cassava (*caçabi*) bread that local people produced by virtue of the arduous labor of grating bitter manioc, squeezing out the poisonous juices, and drying it into flour, and began to produce it commercially for export to other islands or the mainland. They depended on large indigenous-built dugout canoes to move around and on native materials and building styles to fashion houses for themselves and the black and indigenous slaves and servants who worked for them. Above all they used the sea as a highway to connect the islands not only to one another and to the nearby mainland, but to the islands of the Atlantic—the Canaries, Azores, and later São Tomé and Cabo Verde—and the ports of Spain and Portugal as well.

Establishing a European Presence

Although Columbus (his Hispanized surname was Colón) sailed across the Atlantic on behalf of the Spanish crown with crews drawn mostly from Andalucía in southern Spain, he was a Genoese with mercantile experience in the eastern Mediterranean and off the African coast and had lived among the Italian community in Lisbon. There he married a woman from an Italian family that had settled in Portugal in the late 14th century and entered into the Portuguese nobility.[4] Columbus's prior experiences and connections, as well as those of the *Reyes Católicos*, Fernando and Isabel, meant that from the outset, postcontact Caribbean society would have a notably international component. Italian merchants and Portuguese ships and settlers joined Spaniards in pursuing new economic opportunities. The commercial model that the Portuguese had developed along the coast of West Africa and in Asia, where they established trade factories (*feitorias*) at defensible coastal locations, probably influenced Columbus. The Caribbean became even more diverse as enslaved Africans were brought to the islands and German merchants became involved in the slave trade and obtained a concession from Charles V to settle Venezuela.

After Europeans reached the Bahamas in October 1492 they sailed along some other islands but then focused their activities on Hispaniola, where they received a friendly welcome from cacique Guacanagari. He probably was a secondary chief, and the overtures he made to Columbus and his men had unintended consequences. On Christmas eve, the largest of the three Spanish vessels, the Santa María, ran aground near what today is the site of En Bas Saline on Hispaniola's north coast.[5] Guacanagari and his people helped Columbus salvage what they could from the ship and offered hospitality and shelter. When Columbus returned to Europe he left behind 38 men and a fort he named La Navidad, built in part with timber from the ship.

On the basis of that first encounter Columbus organized a second, larger expedition that returned to Hispaniola in 1493 to establish a permanent settlement. The would-be colonists discovered that La Navidad had been destroyed and the men were dead, very possibly as the result of resentment or suspicion of Guacanagari's apparent alliance with the newcomers that threatened to upend the island's hierarchy of chiefdoms.[6] The expedition continued along the north coast, finally reaching the site that became what archaeologist Kathleen Deagan has called the first medieval town in the Americas, La Isabela, located at the mouth of the Río Bahabonico. The exhausted travelers almost immediately were put to the arduous labor of building the town, which included a fortified tower, storehouse, church, a house built of stone for the Admiral, a large open plaza, and earthen walls. Although the site offered some advantages, the indigenous population there was fairly sparse and local inhabitants soon died or fled. Many Europeans left

as well, returning to Spain in face of illness, hunger, and the harsh work regimen that Columbus imposed. Supplies arrived irregularly, and hurricanes destroyed ships in the bay. The decision to abandon the town probably hinged as much on its distance from sources of gold and substantial indigenous communities as it did on the perception of failure. Under the leadership of Columbus's brother Bartolomé, the settlement was relocated to Santo Domingo on the south coast; by 1498 La Isabela lay empty.[7]

Although Columbus had his allies and supporters, complaints about his regime convinced the crown in 1500 to send Francisco de Bobadilla to conduct an inquiry into the situation in Hispaniola. Bobadilla sent Columbus and his brothers back to Spain in chains; Bobadilla himself drowned when a hurricane destroyed the ship on which he was returning to Spain. Although Columbus subsequently made other voyages across the Atlantic, for nearly a decade the Colón family effectively was excluded from exercising authority in the islands. Instead, Fernando and Isabel sent frey Nicolás de Ovando, a *comendador* of the Order of Alcántara and member of a noble family of Extremadura with close ties to the crown, to serve as royal governor and impose order. Ovando departed Spain in February 1502 with an estimated 1200 would-be settlers.[8]

Under Columbus, military campaigns to pacify the interior of Hispaniola had gotten underway by the mid-1490s. Ovando initiated a systematic effort to pacify the entire island and secure Spanish rule that largely succeeded within a few years of his becoming governor. To do this he pursued a dual approach, eliminating the strongest *caciques* and providing Spaniards grants to use indigenous labor, called *repartimientos* (from *repartir*, to distribute), a practice that some already had adopted during the Columbus years. The holder received the title *encomendero* and could use the labor of a specified group of Indians (as they called the native people) on a rotating basis.[9] In principle the people subjected to the *encomienda* remained in their communities and continued to produce crops for their own subsistence, but, not surprisingly, restrictions on Spaniards' use of their labor often were ignored. Men sent to work in gold mines could be absent for long periods, disrupting family life and agricultural cycles, and indigenous workers often labored in deplorable conditions that contributed to rising mortality rates. Women sometimes worked in the mines as well. The Laws of Burgos, promulgated in 1512, represented a response to harsh criticism of the exploitation of the Indians from members of religious orders, especially the Dominicans. The laws were intended to ameliorate working conditions, provide some protections for women, and ensure religious instruction, but their effectiveness is difficult to judge.[10] The *repartimiento* of 1514, in which officials attempted to regularize assignments of labor in Hispaniola, underscored how drastically the numbers of potential laborers had decreased during the first two decades of Spanish rule.

Spaniards did not confine their attentions exclusively to Hispaniola. By the early years of the 16th century Columbus and others had reconnoitered most of the Caribbean and surrounding mainland, radiating out from Hispaniola in several directions. Governor Ovando sent Juan Ponce de León, who together with Juan de Esquivel had pacified the southeastern end of the island and founded Salvaleón de Higüey, to initiate the occupation of Puerto Rico in 1508. Esquivel occupied Jamaica starting in 1509, with Pánfilo de Narváez acting as second-in-command. Diego Velázquez, who went to Hispaniola with Columbus in 1493 and conquered the western end of the island where he founded Salvatierra de la Sabana, organized his expedition to conquer Cuba there in 1511. He was joined by Narváez, who had left Jamaica, and Bartolomé de Las Casas, whose experience of the brutal occupation of Cuba would convince him of the immorality of Spaniards' treatment of the Indians. In the same years Spaniards established a foothold in Panama and what they would call Tierra Firme (the northern coast of South America). In 1510 Darién became the first permanent settlement on the mainland. In 1513 Juan Ponce de León made his first foray to Florida, having been pushed out of Puerto Rico by the new royal governor, don Diego Colón (son of the first admiral), who replaced Ovando in 1510.[11] Before the end of the decade Spaniards were reconnoitering the coast of Yucatan.

Expanding networks of contact, communication and commerce tied the Caribbean together, but various parts of the region differed quite a bit, and some distinctive patterns of development, interaction and connection emerged. What might be considered the "greater Caribbean" can be roughly divided into four overlapping geographical sub-regions: (a) the major islands or Greater Antilles: Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Jamaica; (b) the southeastern Caribbean, including Venezuela and the neighboring "pearl" islands of Cubagua and La Margarita; (c) the southwestern mainland, including Panama, Cartagena de Indias and Santa Marta (both today in Colombia); and (d) the Gulf region, comprising western Cuba, Yucatán, Veracruz, and Florida. Vital links bound these sub-regions to one another as well; Puerto Rico, for example, had significant ties to the Lesser Antilles, and Jamaica was well situated to trade with Tierra Firme and Central America.

Economic Development

From the outset Europeans in the Caribbean sought commodities that would be profitable enough to allow them to pay off their debts, consolidate their gains, and move on to new territories. Although the local people were familiar with gold and used it for ornamentation, they did not possess or produce it in substantial quantities. As a result, efforts to barter for it or to impose a tribute to be paid in gold soon failed, forcing Spaniards to become directly involved in the organization of mining. This had enormous consequences for the entire region. The emphasis on gold mining meant that maintaining an adequate labor base became a high priority. Spaniards flooded into the islands in the Americas' first gold rush, and the sites of some towns were chosen for their proximity to mines. Early shipments of gold to Spain ensured the avid interest of the crown in the new territories, which was reflected in the flood of ordinances dispatched to the islands. Initially, the crown claimed half of all the gold that was mined, a demand later reduced to a third and finally a fifth.

Gold was found very early in substantial amounts in Hispaniola and Puerto Rico, and in somewhat lesser quantities in Cuba.[12] Jamaica lacked gold and therefore was of marginal interest to most Spaniards, as were the Bahamas and most of the Lesser Antilles. Since the Bahamas were judged "useless" islands, their people, the Lucayos, were especially vulnerable to capture and enslavement. On the islands where there was gold periodic *fundiciones*, when miners brought their gold to be smelted, played an important role in the local economy, as not only were royal taxes paid but debts (especially those owed to merchants) were settled as well.[13]

Some small islands near the coast of northern South America offered another highly lucrative commodity: pearls. For several decades the pearl fisheries were so profitable that they supported a substantial Spanish presence on Cubagua, a barren island whose residents had to import water from nearby Margarita. Cubagua's capital, Nueva Cádiz, became a thriving and substantial port town, although by the late 1530s it was all but abandoned.[14] Like gold mining, pearl fishing required a good deal of labor, in this case of a highly specialized sort, given the demands and hazards of diving.

These two lucrative enterprises fueled the rapid development and expansion of Spanish society in the Caribbean and contributed greatly to the disruption and devastation of indigenous societies, as people were relocated and forced to work in unhealthy and often dangerous conditions. The profits from gold and pearls underwrote a burgeoning transatlantic commerce that brought a range of commodities, including ceramics, clothing, wine, cheese, wheat, iron tools, armaments, and even bricks to the Caribbean from Spain and the Canary Islands. Soon the demand for imports included African slaves as well. They began to arrive in substantial numbers in the 1520s, often on Portuguese ships and mainly destined for Hispaniola

and Puerto Rico. Regional and local trade, most of it seaborne, and expeditions to capture indigenous slaves to sell in the islands that were rapidly losing their native workforces complemented transatlantic commerce.[15]

Spaniards' search for viable exports was not confined to gold and pearls. In the early years they exported some brazilwood from Hispaniola as well as canafistula, a tropical tree whose fruit was used for medicinal purposes, and balsam. In Cuba they found copper near the island's first Spanish capital, Santiago. These enterprises did not operate on a substantial scale. The introduction of European livestock led to the rapid proliferation of cattle, horses, and pigs, and cattle ranching expanded. By the 1540s some herds on Hispaniola numbered in the many thousands but, lacking substantial markets, were of little value. Some cattle and mares were exported to New Spain, in exchange for indigenous slaves, and the islands sent hides to Spain, but their quality was not of the best.[16]

Sugar was the first significant commercial crop of the 16th-century Caribbean.[17] Like gold mining, the introduction of sugar cultivation had a considerable impact on many aspects of life in the Greater Antilles. Not surprisingly, sugar production began in Hispaniola. Faced with declining gold production and the prospect of continuing departures from the islands to more attractive destinations (first Mexico in the 1520s and then Peru in the 1530s), the crown offered a few individuals loans to help defray the initial costs of establishing sugar estates, or *ingenios* as they were called (*ingenio* meant the mill itself). Those costs could be considerable, including the expense of constructing buildings, digging irrigation canals, importing equipment for the mill, hiring a sugar master, and purchasing slaves.

With the decline of gold mining, sugar estates not only came to constitute the most highly capitalized enterprise in the large islands; they also became the core of substantial, ethnically-mixed communities of Spanish, mestizo, Indigenous, and black managers, workers, and slaves. Officials began to view the *ingenios* as pueblos that anchored diminishing populations and tried to ensure that the residents of these communities received adequate attention from both civil and religious authorities. Because of their importance as stable nuclei of population, officials continued to provide support for the *ingenios* in the form of loans, and on occasion they took measures to ensure their integrity. In at least one case in Hispaniola they prevented an estate from being broken up to pay off the debts of the deceased owner for fear the *ingenio*'s demise would exacerbate the area's depopulation.[18]

Demographic Change

By the middle of the 16th century—and indeed earlier—the demographic transformations that had occurred in one place after another following the arrival of Europeans were enormous and irreversible. The size of indigenous populations at the time of contact remains a controversial topic; numbers cannot be determined with complete accuracy. Hispaniola was home to perhaps half a million or more people, and Puerto Rico is thought to have had perhaps half that number, while Cuba and Jamaica supported smaller populations. Whatever the numbers were at contact they dropped precipitously as Europeans poured into the islands. Although there is general agreement that the first epidemic hit the large islands in 1518–1519, by then famine and illness already had taken a significant toll.[19] To escape the Europeans and their unrelenting demands, local people fled from one island to another or into mountainous interiors; in the case of the Leewards they sometimes retreated to the mainland. Spaniards who organized expeditions invariably commandeered local Indians to act as their auxiliaries, further reducing island populations.

Local officials in Cuba, for example, complained about the large numbers of both Spaniards and Indians that Hernando Cortés recruited for his 1519 expedition to Mexico and leveled similar complaints against Hernando de Soto when he organized his expedition to Florida twenty years later.

The arrival of growing numbers of Africans contributed significantly to the region's demographic transformation. In the first half of the 16th century the greatest concentrations of enslaved Africans were in Hispaniola, with estimates of their numbers as high as 20,000 at mid-century. While that figure might be exaggerated, the African presence expanded rapidly, not only in the Greater Antilles but in the southern Caribbean as well. In the second half of the 16th century Cartagena would take its place alongside Santo Domingo and Havana as an important destination and entrepôt for the expanding transatlantic slave trade.[20] Spaniards took advantage of African expertise in raising cattle and in mining and refining gold. The importation of African slaves in some measure did solve the labor problem, especially on the sugar estates. Notwithstanding the benefits of using African slave labor, however, the introduction of yet another ethnic and racial group who were forced to migrate involuntarily to the islands further contributed to the uncertainty of life in an already turbulent colonial society. The revolt of African slaves that began on the Hispaniola estate of don Diego Colón in 1522 often is considered to have been the first major rebellion of Africans in the Americas, although some one hundred blacks in Puerto Rico had rebelled eight years earlier.[21] Escaped slaves could cause turmoil and destruction, sometimes joining forces with Indians in opposition to Spanish society.[22]

While the ethics of turning to African and indigenous slaves from elsewhere as a way to protect what remained of the islands' native people certainly are questionable, in the early years Spaniards did consider measures aimed at mitigating the experience of enslavement for blacks. They stipulated that half of all slaves—later reduced to a more realistic one-third—brought to the islands should be women and tried to encourage the marriage of slave couples, hoping that would foster stability. There even was some consideration given to the possibility that married, Christianized African slaves might gain their freedom. This idea went nowhere, but the ambiguity of language in some proposed colonization plans that referred to black slaves and Spanish settlers alike as potential *vecinos* (citizens, heads of household) suggests some uncertainty as to whether enslaved status was necessarily permanent.

The omnipresence of Indian and black slaves and servants on estates and in mines, towns and households, where they usually outnumbered Spaniards, produced societies that from the outset were highly diverse and quite distinct from the places Europeans left behind. Indeed, one of the notable characteristics of the early Caribbean was its novelty. The close contact and mixing among these ethnic and racial groups was unprecedented and affected everyone. Towns, estates, and Spanish households, even modest ones, became microcosms embodying the complexity of the larger society. Consider, for example, the household of a woman named doña Isabel Maraver, who moved to Hispaniola with her parents and sisters in 1515. Promised in marriage to a long-time (and doubtless much older) resident of the island, her husband, Gonzalo de Guzmán, openly acknowledged that he had married only because of the *encomienda* of 120 Indians that he was promised in dowry. After the *repartimiento* of 1514, however, no Indians remained to be assigned. By the time Guzmán died in 1531 the household was in debt and lacked almost any source of income. After his death, doña Isabel's impoverished household included two male black slaves said to be one hundred years old and a third who was missing a hand; two girls, the daughters of one of the black slaves, who had been born in her house and whom she considered to be like her daughters; two mestiza girls, the daughters of indigenous mothers and Spanish fathers, whom she also supported; and her father and the orphaned children of a sister.[23] Her story suggests the economic vicissitudes of this rapidly changing society—her husband was said to have been a "rich man" at one time—as well as the vulnerability of even upper-class Spanish women to the volatility of Caribbean life.

Institutions and Society in the Early Spanish Caribbean

Apart from economic instability, the risks of life in the Caribbean were very real. Hurricanes, French corsairs, and so-called Carib Indians arrived regularly in the islands (the last in Puerto Rico especially because of its proximity to the Lesser Antilles) and, along with indigenous rebels and black *cimarrones* (runaway slaves), caused considerable human and material damage.[24] Local officials organized *cuadrillas* (squads) of Spaniards, Indians, and trusted blacks (*negros de confianza*) to search out escaped slaves. They constantly pleaded with the Crown and its Council of the Indies to provide them with the arms and funding needed to build or maintain enormously expensive fortifications for key port towns to provide protection against the marauding French. After it had burned three times before the middle of the 16th century, officials decided to relocate the town of San Germán in Puerto Rico some distance inland to be out of the range of French guns.

The difficulty of obtaining funding for defense and fortifications underscores the challenges local government faced in the Caribbean. In contrast to Castile, where municipalities often owned properties (*propios*) that provided income, few Caribbean towns had any regular source of income and had to levy special taxes (*sisas*) to meet crucial expenses. They needed money to build and maintain roads and other public works and buildings, and the religious establishment also sometimes looked to municipalities for funds, although the Church had an income from tithes. Not surprisingly, this income was subject to conflicting claims on the part of the different entities that formed the ecclesiastical establishment. Royal commitments of funding to both religious and civil authorities often failed to materialize or fell short of the promised amounts.

The basic institutions associated with Iberian life came into existence fairly quickly. Most towns had a *cabildo* with *regidores* (councilmen) as well as *alcaldes* (magistrates of the first instance) and at least one *alguacil* (constable). The Crown appointed royal officials (treasurer, inspector, accountant) who almost always served as *regidores* in the cities where they were based (Santo Domingo, San Juan, Santiago de Cuba), an innovation that challenged municipal autonomy and reinforced royal authority. Individual islands had lieutenant governors who, although they exercised a good deal of authority, did not receive a salary, whereas royal officials did.

The powers that Fernando and Isabel had granted to Columbus complicated the effort to establish an overall governing authority for the region. Columbus first played that role, then Ovando, followed by don Diego Colón. After his tenure, three Jeronymite friars appointed to a commission to look into possible reforms exercised authority, although the contemporary presence of royal judges created an ambiguous situation. Only in the 1520s was a high court (*audiencia*) constituted on the model of the *chancillería* courts in Valladolid and Granada, with a president and two judges (*oidores*).

The ecclesiastical establishment also expanded incrementally. The large islands (except Jamaica), Venezuela, and Panama had bishops and cathedral churches with the usual dignitaries although they often fell short of fully staffing these entities. The first bishop of Puerto Rico, don Alonso Manso, exercised inquisitorial functions. Religious orders—Franciscans, Dominicans, Mercedarians—established monasteries and churches, and by 1535 plans were underway for a convent for women in Santo Domingo and for expanding a school that became the basis for the first university.

Notwithstanding the importance of the religious establishment for Spanish society, Christianization of the indigenous inhabitants of the Caribbean was supposed to receive high priority. Although the Dominicans, and above all Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, are closely associated with protests against the exploitation of the Indians and calls for reform, the Franciscans may have been in closer contact with the local people in

the early years, establishing monasteries and schools for the sons of caciques. The famous indigenous rebel Enrique received an education at the Franciscan monastery at Verapaz in Hispaniola where he apparently became a practicing Christian, and he subsequently maintained ties with some of his Franciscan mentors. The regular orders were not solely responsible for Christianization. Secular priests in some cases also were expected to contribute to the effort, as were lay people, especially women.

The presence of both ecclesiastical and civil officials whose jurisdictions were not always clearly distinguished (as was often true in the early modern Iberian world) contributed to the turbulent politics of these societies. In 1532 Manuel de Rojas, who twice served as lieutenant governor of Cuba, alleged that the contention between Cuba's bishop Fray Miguel Ramírez and former lieutenant governor Gonzalo de Guzmán on the one hand and royal officials on the other was responsible for much of the turmoil that racked island society. Yet secular and religious spheres were not necessarily at odds. In the early 16th century two men—Sebastián Ramírez de Fuenleal and Alonso de Fuenmayor—served as both bishop of Santo Domingo and Concepción de la Vega and president of the *audiencia*. The former went on to serve as president of the second *audiencia* of New Spain and the latter became Santo Domingo's first archbishop in 1546.

Powerful men in the Caribbean often combined officeholding with a range of economic activities, including mining, commerce, ownership of sugar estates, and involvement in the trade in indigenous and African slaves. Some of these men were among the earliest arrivals in the islands or their relatives, or they had strong connections with the Crown, or both. Such was the case of Miguel de Pasamonte, a man close to King Fernando who had served as his ambassador to France and England and as secretary to Fernando's second wife, Germana. Pasamonte went to Hispaniola in 1508 as treasurer-general of the Indies and was succeeded as treasurer of Hispaniola by his nephew, Esteban de Pasamonte. The Pasamontes owned a large sugar estate. Holding office, especially a crown appointment, could confer considerable economic advantages. For example, when Puerto Rico's treasurer Andrés de Haro died in 1519, his possessions were valued at 88,500 pesos de oro, nearly half of which were "*joyas, oro, plata*." An inventory of his belongings included 58 black slaves worth 11,600 pesos. It is worth noting that the inventory did not include his houses in San Germán and San Juan or, of course, the one hundred Indians he held in *encomienda*.[25]

Many families, even the best connected and situated, found it difficult to maintain their wealth over more than a generation or two. Esteban de Pasamonte's daughter doña Juana de Pasamonte married the son of another powerful figure in early Hispaniola, Lucas Vásquez de Ayllón, who served first as *alcalde mayor* of Concepción, then as royal appeals judge (*juez de apelación*) and later as *oidor*. He was involved in sugar cultivation and the trade in captive Indians as well. His ambitions, however, left his family, if not ruined, then certainly in much more modest circumstances than they might have expected. In 1526 he invested heavily in an expedition to the mid-Atlantic coast of North America and established a short-lived colony on the South Carolina coast that failed. He did not survive. Other wealthy men who left the islands for the mainland shared a similar fate: Juan Ponce de León died in 1521 following his second attempt to land on the Florida coast; Rodrigo de Bastidas was fatally wounded by fellow Spaniards in Santa Marta in 1526; Pánfilo de Narváez and Hernando de Soto both died in expeditions to the southeastern part of what is now the United States in 1528 and 1542 respectively. The Caribbean offered few guarantees of wealth or stability.

After the near disappearance of the islands' indigenous inhabitants and Spanish successes on the mainland, other destinations became increasingly attractive to Spaniards. Officials worried constantly about depopulation. Towns that had flourished during the heyday of gold mining shrank alarmingly, although many survived as much smaller entities, and some towns actually grew. From the early years of the 16th century the Crown had promoted plans for colonization. A few men continued to propose

implementing these schemes, which entailed recruiting a specified number of Europeans and blacks, preferably married. Portuguese, who earlier had settled in the Canary Islands in large numbers, often were sought as potential settlers.

The Transformation of the Caribbean

Although the transformation of the Caribbean is often dated to the "sugar revolution" of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the sugar plantation and slavery complex that to a great extent has defined the image of the region took shape in British- and French-held territories, in fact vast changes already had taken place by the middle of the 16th century. Black slaves were numerous, and the large islands were producing sugar commercially. Basic institutions of church and government had been established. In many ways, early island societies already resembled the Spanish America of a much later era, although many of the native residents had disappeared or were living in dramatically different circumstances than in precontact times. Spanish men married or appropriated indigenous women, and often the children from those unions became integrated into Spanish society. In the same decades people from Europe—Spaniards, Italians, Portuguese, Germans—and slaves from Africa and other parts of the Americas poured into the islands, further transforming their racial and social composition and fostering even more mixing and cultural interaction.

Discussion of the Literature

For many years the history of the early Spanish Caribbean did not receive a great deal of attention from Anglophone scholars, with some exceptions.[26] The publication of Carl O. Sauer's *The Early Spanish Main* in 1969 signaled a renewed interest in the early Spanish Caribbean. Based mostly on the work of early chroniclers and historians (Peter Martyr, Bartolomé de Las Casas, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo) and published documentary sources, the book offers a detailed examination of Caribbean places and peoples, and the Europeans' impact on both—and vice versa. Sauer demonstrated the connections between various localities and laid the foundation for understanding the greater Caribbean as both a coherent and a disparate region. Sauer's work remains important, although more recent scholarship has expanded and modified some of his conclusions.

Sauer's book did not lead to a strong upsurge of interest in the early Spanish Caribbean among Anglophone scholars, with again some important exceptions in the 1970s and 1980s.[27] In contrast, during those same years scholars in Spain and the Spanish Caribbean conducted extensive research, mainly in the Archivo General de Indias (AGI), and published compilations of transcribed documents (see "Primary Sources"). They also published substantial scholarship based on that documentation, an effort that continues to the present. Carlos Esteban Deive, Luis Arranz Márquez, Enrique Otte, Levi Marrero, Emilio Rodríguez Demorizi, and Jalil Sued Badillo produced important work in the 1970s through the 1990s, and they have been joined more recently by Esteban Mira Caballos, Genaro Rodríguez Morel, and Francisco Moscoso.[28]

Contemporary scholars are rapidly expanding knowledge and understanding of the early Spanish Caribbean and its place in the developing Atlantic world. Archaeologists such Roberto Valcarcel Rojas, William Keegan, and Kathleen Deagan have focused on contact-era and postcontact sites in the Caribbean, shedding important light on the impact of the European presence on indigenous communities.[29] Among historians doing innovative research are Molly Warsh on the production of and commerce in pearls, David

Wheat and Marc Eagle on the early slave trade to the Caribbean and Spanish America and connections with the Canary Islands, Erin Stone on the Indigenous slave trade, Spencer Tyce on the Germans in Venezuela, Shannon Lalor on aristocratic women in early Spanish Cuba, Lauren MacDonald on the regular orders and religious conversion, and Ida Altman on women, family, ethnicity and society in the Greater Antilles.[30]

This recent scholarship suggests that the early Spanish Caribbean was far more than the launching grounds for Spanish colonization of the mainland. It was a complex and dynamic milieu in its own right. Rather than an insignificant backwater important only as a meeting-place for the Indies fleets that began to function in the 1560s, the Caribbean remained a vital part of Spain's empire and the Atlantic world.

Primary Sources

Most of the existing records for the Spanish Caribbean up to 1550 are housed in the Archivo General de Indias (AGI) in Seville, although relevant sources exist in other Spanish repositories, including the Archivo General de Simancas (AGS). There are numerous collections of documents relevant to this period that have been transcribed and published, nearly all of them based on documentation in the AGI. The online Portal de Archivos Españoles (PARES) allows remote access to digitized material in the AGI and other Spanish archives. Sections such as *Patronato* and *Indiferente General* have been extensively digitized, as have some key *legajos* of the *Audiencia* of Santo Domingo for the time period, while very little material in sections like *Justicia* and *Contaduría* is available online. Documentation relevant to the early Spanish Caribbean also can be found in national archives in Bogotá, Mexico City, and Lima. Local archives in the Caribbean with notarial, city council, and parish records exist in some places but date at earliest to the second half or final third of the 16th century. In addition to archival records, the writings of contemporary chroniclers and historians Bartolomé de Las Casas (*Historia de las Indias*) and Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo (*Historia General de las Indias*) are important, as both men lived in the islands and neighboring mainland and included their own observations in their work. The work of both, at least in part, has appeared in English translation. The work of another observer of the early Spanish Caribbean, the Italian Girolamo Benzoni, recently has been published in translation.[31]

Among transcribed works a useful starting point for the early Spanish Caribbean is the volume of Juan Bautista Muñoz's manuscripts edited by Roberto Marte.[32] Muñoz was mainly responsible for creating the AGI in the late 18th century, bringing together Indies-related records from several sources (including the archives of the *Casa de la Contratación* and the *Consejo de Indias* and the royal archive in Simancas). He transcribed some documents and paraphrased others. The documents largely pertain to Hispaniola but not exclusively. Older multivolume works such as the *Colección de documentos inéditos relativos al descubrimiento, conquista y colonización de las posesiones españoles en América y Oceanía* include both full and partial transcriptions of documents found in the AGI.

Many compilations of transcribed documents focus on a single country or island; others focus on a single topic or document.[33] Collections of documents relating to the period that are translated into English are scarce, although there are noteworthy exceptions.[34]

Links to Digital Materials

Portal de Archivos Españoles <http://pares.mcu.es/>.

Slave Societies Digital Archive <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/esss/>, Vanderbilt University.

CUNY Dominican Studies Institute <http://Spanishpaleographytool.org> (includes early 16th-century documents from the Caribbean from a paleography project at the Institute).

Further Reading

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Notes

1. Indigenous migrations to the islands did not end altogether with the arrival of Europeans, although doubtless the European presence changed them; see Jason M. Yaremko, *Indigenous Passages to Cuba, 1515–1900* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2016).

2. Spanish jurist Juan de Palacios Rubios wrote the Requirement, versions of which already existed, based on the 1493 papal *Inter caetera* bulls of donation.

3. See William F. Keegan, “The ‘Classic’ Taíno,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Caribbean Archaeology*, ed. William F. Keegan, Corinne L. Hofman, and Reniel Rodríguez Ramos (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). He writes (p. 81) “Taino is not a specific way of life or a particular belief system; it is a social formation that incorporated distinct groups, allowing them to maintain their distinctiveness, while incorporating social groups in a regional political economy.”

4. For Columbus's background see William D. Phillips Jr. and Carla Rahn Phillips, *The Worlds of Christopher Columbus* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

5. See Florida Museum of Natural History, Historical Archaeology <https://www.floridamuseum.ufl.edu/histarch/ebs_intro.htm>.

6. Samuel M. Wilson, *Hispaniola. Caribbean Chiefdoms in the Age of Columbus* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1990).

7. Kathleen Deagan and José María Cruxent, *Columbus's Outpost among the Taínos* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 50–52, 54–70.

8. See Esteban Mira Caballos, *Nicolás de Ovando y los orígenes del sistema colonial español, 1502–1509* (Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic: Patronato de la Ciudad Colonial de Santo Domingo, 2000). He argues (p. 63) for the figure of 1200 instead of the generally accepted number of 2500 passengers, based on his calculation of the tonnage of the ships and the other items they transported.

9. By the 1530s the term "*encomienda*" was being used, at least by officials, and would come into more general use when the institution was introduced on the mainland.

10. The New Laws of 1542 represented a second, more thoroughgoing attempt to provide protections for Indians, prohibiting enslavement and eliminating Spanish access to indigenous labor through the *encomienda*. They were introduced in the islands as elsewhere in Spanish America, but, given the enormous reduction in indigenous populations in much of the Caribbean, they had little impact.

11. The best source for the details of Spanish exploration, expansion, and conquest is Carl O. Sauer, *The Early Spanish Main* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969).

12. Earl J. Hamilton calculated that a total of approximately 287,000 pesos of gold were shipped to Spain from the islands in the period 1503–1510 and around 438,000 pesos in the years 1511–1520; see his "Imports of American Gold and Silver into Spain, 1503–1660," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 43 (1929): 464, Table A. Jalil Sued Badillo offers a higher estimate for Hispaniola's gold production from 1505 to 1517 of between one-and-a-half and two million *pesos de oro* and emphasizes that gold production continued through the rest of the 16th century "*en grado respetable*." His calculation for total production in Puerto Rico between 1509 and 1546 is around two million pesos; see *El Dorado Borincano: La economía de la conquista, 1510 a 1550* (San Juan, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Puerto, 2001), 356–359 and Appendix A, which also includes data for Cuba, unfortunately much less complete.

13. The most thorough examination of the organization of early gold mining is in Sued Badillo, *El Dorado borincano*.

14. See Enrique Otte, *Las perlas del Caribe: Nueva Cádiz de Cubagua* (Caracas, Venezuela: Fundación John Boulton, 1977) and Molly A. Warsh, "A Political Ecology in the Early Spanish Caribbean," *William and Mary Quarterly* 71, no. 4 (October 2014): 517–548.

15. On intracolonial trade see Alejandro de la Fuente, César García del Pino, and Bernardo Iglesias Delgado, *Havana and the Atlantic in the Sixteenth Century* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

16. See Donald E. Chipman, "The Traffic in Indian Slaves in the Province of Pánuco, 1523–1533," *The Americas* 23, no. 1 (1966): 142–155.

17. See Genaro Rodríguez Morel, "The Sugar Economy of Española in the Sixteenth Century" and Alejandro de la Fuente, "Sugar and Slavery in Early Colonial Cuba" in *Tropical Babylons: Sugar and the Making of the Atlantic World, 1450–1680*, ed. Stuart B. Schwartz (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

18. On indebtedness and royal loans, see Rodríguez Morel, "The Sugar Economy," in *Tropical Babylons*, ed. Schwartz, 96. There was a precedent for this in Madeira going back to the late 15th century; see Alberto Vieira, "Sugar Islands: the Sugar Economy of Madeira and the Canaries, 1450–1650" in *Tropical Babylons*, ed. Schwartz, 59.

19. See Massimo Livi Bacci, “Return to Hispaniola: Reassessing a Demographic Catastrophe,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 83, no. 1 (2003): 3–51 for how contact populations might be calculated. For a discussion of disease and mortality in the early Spanish Caribbean see Noble David Cook, *Born to Die: Disease and New World Conquest, 1492–1650* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Chapter 1.

20. See David Wheat, *Atlantic Africa and the Spanish Caribbean, 1570–1640* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2016) on Cartagena and Havana and de la Fuente, *Havana*. Havana became Cuba’s capital in the second half of the sixteenth century.

21. In 1535 Melchor de Castro, who was the *escribano de minas* in Española, described the revolt in which his cattle estate was robbed and a black and twelve Indian slaves were stolen; see AGI Justicia 1003 N. 5 R. 2; on Puerto Rico see Jalil Sued Badillo and Angel López Cantos, *Puerto Rico negro* (Río Piedras, Puerto Rico: Editorial Cultural, 1986), 175.

22. See Ida Altman, “The Revolt of Enriquillo and the Historiography of Early Spanish America,” *The Americas* 63, no. 4 (2007): 587–614, and Erin Stone, “America’s First Slave Revolt: Indians and African Slaves in Española, 1500–1534,” *Ethnohistory* 60, no. 2 (2013): 195–217.

23. AGI Santo Domingo 9 N. 42.

24. The term *cimarrón* was used for both Indians and blacks. The English were not active in the Caribbean in this period. The earliest known visit of an English ship occurred in 1527 when one arrived in Santo Domingo; the encounter was ambiguous but friendly.

25. Sued Badillo, *El Dorado borincano*, 364.

26. See Irene A. Wright, *The Early History of Cuba, 1492–1586* (New York, NY: Forgotten Books, 2012 [1st ed., 1916]); Mervyn Ratekin, “The Early Sugar Industry in Española,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 34, no. 2 (1954): 1–19; and Antonine S. Tibesar, “The Franciscan Province of the Holy Cross of Española, 1505–1559,” *The Americas* 13, no. 4 (1957): 377–389.

27. See Troy Floyd, *The Columbus Dynasty in the Caribbean, 1492–1526* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1973); Kenneth R. Andrews, *The Spanish Caribbean: Trade and Plunder, 1530–1630* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978); and Paul E. Hoffman, *The Spanish Crown and the Defense of the Caribbean, 1535–1585: Precedent, Patrimonialism, and Royal Parsimony* (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 1980).

28. Luis Arranz Márquez, *Emigración española a Indies: poblamiento y despoblación antillanos* (Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic: Ediciones García Arévalo, 1979); Carlos Esteban Deive, *La esclavitud del negro en Santo Domingo, 1492–1844* (Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic: Museo del Hombre Dominicano, 1980); Levi Marrero, *Cuba: economía y sociedad*, vol. I (Río Piedras, Puerto Rico: Editorial San Juan, 1972) and 2 (Madrid: Editorial Playor, 1972); Genaro Rodríguez Morel, *Orígenes de la economía de plantación de Española* (Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic: Editora Nacional, 2012); Francisco Moscoso, *Caguas en la conquista española del siglo 16* (Río Piedras, Puerto Rico, 2016 [revised edition]).

29. See Roberto Valcárcel Rojas, *Archaeology of Early Colonial Interaction at El Chorro de Maita, Cuba* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2016); Robyn P. Woodward, “Feudalism or Agrarian Capitalism? The Archaeology of the Early Sixteenth-Century Sugar Industry” in *Out of Many, One People. The Historical Archaeology of Colonial Jamaica*, eds. James Delle, Mark W. Hauser, and Douglas V. Armstrong (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2011); and Kathleen Deagan, “Colonial Transformation: Euro-American Cultural Genesis in the Early Spanish-American Colonies,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 52, no. 2 (1996): 135–160.

30. See, for example, Spencer Tyce, “German Conquistadors and Venture Capitalists: The Welser Company’s Commercial Experiment in 16th Century Venezuela and the Caribbean World” (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 2015); Erin Stone, “Slave Raiders vs. Friars: Tierra Firme, 1513–1522,” *The Americas* 74, no. 2 (2017): 139–170; Michael Perri,

"Ambiguous Authority: Juan de Frías and the Audiencia of Santo Domingo Confront the Conquistador Antonio de Sedeño (1537)," *The Americas* 74, no. 4 (2017): 427–455; Ida Altman, "Spanish Women in the Caribbean, 1493–1540" in *Women of the Iberian Atlantic*, ed. Sarah E. Owens and Jane E. Mangan (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 2012), 57–81.

31. See Robert C. Schwaller and Janet Byars, eds., *The History of the New World* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017).

32. Roberto Marte, ed., *Santo Domingo en los manuscritos de Juan Bautista Muñoz* (Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic: Ediciones Fundación García Arévalo, 1981).

33. Some examples are Genaro Rodríguez Morel, comp., *Cartas del cabildo de la ciudad de Santo Domingo en el siglo XVI* (Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic: Centro de Altos Estudio Humanísticos y del Idioma Española, 1999) and *Cartas de la Real Audiencia de Santo Domingo (1530–1546)* (Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic: Archivo de la Nación, 2007); Aurelio Tanodi, comp., *Documentos de la Real Hacienda de Puerto Rico*, Vol. 2 (1510–1546) (San Juan, Puerto Rico: Centro de Investigaciones Históricas, 2009); Carol F. Jopling, comp., *Indios y negros en Panamá en los siglos XVI y XVII: Selecciones de los documentos del Archivo General de Indias* (Antigua: Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamerica, 1994); and Enrique Otte, comp., *Cedulario de la monarquía española relativos a la isla de Cubagua, 1523–1550* (Caracas, Venezuela: Fundación John Boulton y Fundación Eugenio Mendoza, 1961). See also Emilio Rodríguez Demorizi, *Los Dominicos y las encomiendas de indios de la Isla Española* (Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic: Editora del Caribe, 1971), which provides a transcription of the 1514 *repartimiento* of indigenous labor on Hispaniola as well as of the *Interragotorio jeronimiano*; Consuelo Varela, *La caída de Colón: el juicio de Bobadilla* (Madrid, Spain: Marcial Pons Historia, 2006); and José Luis Saez, S.J., comp., *La iglesia y el negro esclavo en Santo Domingo* (Santo Domingo: Patronato de la Ciudad Colonial de Santo Domingo, 1994). In addition a number of publications that are not primarily compilations of documents sometimes include lengthy transcriptions, such as Esteban Mira Caballos, "Las cuentas del tesorero Cristóbal de Santa Clara, 1505–1507" in his *La Española, epicentro del Caribe en el siglo XVI* (Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic: Academia Dominicana de la Historia, 2010), 79–222 (original in the AGS).

34. One such is Irene A. Wright, *Spanish Documents Concerning English Voyages to the Caribbean, 1527–1568* (London, UK: Hakluyt Society, 1929). The exception is Columbus-related material; see, for example, Geoffrey Symcox and Blair Sullivan, *Christopher Columbus and the Enterprise of the Indies: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005) and Neil L. Whitehead, *Of Cannibals and Kings: Primal Anthropology in the Americas* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), which includes a new translation of Fray Ramón Pané's early account of indigenous beliefs and origin myths collected at Columbus's instigation. For a collection in Spanish of letters and reports relating to Columbus and his era, many of them lesser known, see Juan Gil and Consuelo Varela, comp., *Cartas de particulares a Colón y relaciones coetáneas* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1984).

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