

THE
ENSLAVED INDIANS
 OF THE
SPANISH CARIBBEAN
 REPORTS & ACCOUNTS, 1495-1544

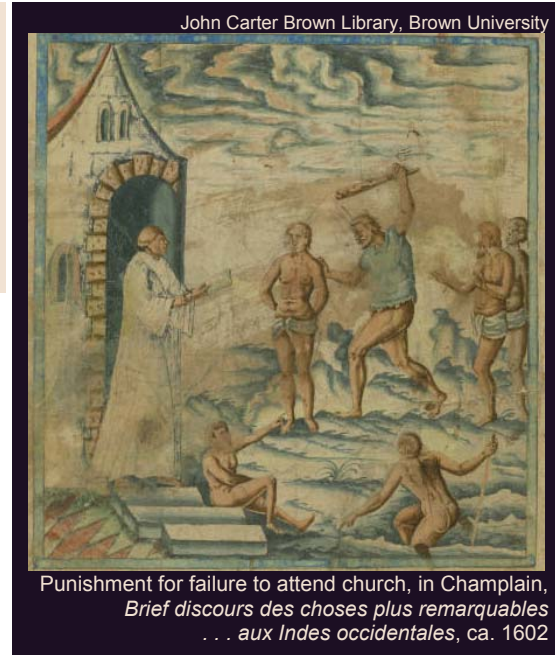
HISPANIOLA

[ca. 1495] The *Comendador Mayor* gave orders for the establishment and settlement of a town in Jaragua, which he named Vera Paz [True Peace]. Diego Velazquez also founded a town in the province of Haniguayaba, on the south coast, and called it Salvatierra de la Sabana . . . Another town was founded, by order of the *Comendador Mayor*, also on the south coast

The preparation of town sites in these various places was not done by Spaniards with shovels in their hands, not by their sweat and labor; for none of them even knew how to level the ground. It was the Indians, constrained by them and terrorized by the massacres, who did all the work, laid out the sites, built the houses, and cleared the ground for cultivation; and so the *Comendador Mayor* began to follow the policy that Francisco Roldan had inaugurated, that the Admiral [Columbus] had tolerated, and that the *Comendador* Bobadilla had strengthened and

CUBA

In the past the treatment [of the Indians] was very bad; now [it is better] because they are needed, since the Spaniards are supported by their services, and if they are treated harshly, they hang themselves or let themselves die. They do not give much work, especially when they extract gold, since they are given good sustenance and a *real* [silver coin] every day. If they were free they would just be idle and fight, which would cause the loss of lives, souls, and the property of the settlers, and Your Majesty would lose the island. Although this does not produce revenue now, it is impor-



extended. That was, to compel the Indians to build the houses and dig the ground that the Spaniards required, and do whatever else they wanted, not only essential services but many unnecessary tasks as well. In short, the Spaniards began to behave as though they were the natural rulers, and as though the Indians were their subjects and vassals; or rather, their chattel slaves.

Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España y islas de Tierra Firme*, 1561

tant to preserve it, and if the Indians were freed, within two years there would be few [settlers] left in the towns of Puerto del Principe, Sanctispiritus, Trinidad, Baracoa, and even Bayamo. Thus the latter and Havana would be the only towns left, and the island would become impassable because the thick-ness of its forests would close the roads, though Your Majesty would not have to pay the governor, bishop, clergy, or officials, since we would all leave.

Bishop of Santiago,
 Report on his inspection of Cuba, 1544

Excerpted and images added by the National Humanities Center, 2006: www.nhc.rtp.nc.us/pds/pds.htm. In John H. Parry & Robert G. Keith, eds. *New Iberian World: A Documentary History of the Discovery and Settlement of Latin America to the Early 17th Century* (Times Books, 1984), Vol. II: The Caribbean, pp. 271, 282-283, 334-335, 340, 356-357. Permission pending. Complete image credits at www.nhc.rtp.nc.us/pds/amerbegin/imagecredits.htm.

BAHAMAS

[ca. 1515] Those Spaniards who were exhausting the Indians in the gold mines and in other forms of killing labor saw that their numbers dwindled every day and that they were dying out. Having no thought beyond their own material interests and the loss that the disappearance of the Indians might cause them, they hit on the idea of bringing in people from other islands to take the place of those who perished here, in order to keep the mines and other business enterprises going. . . .

When [the Indians] arrived, mostly at Puerto de Plata and Puerto Real on the north opposite the

HISPANIOLA

Some say that Your Highness should command all the Indians of this island to be set free entirely, so that no Spaniard might employ their labor except by their own free will. Their welfare should be entrusted to religious persons who would instruct them in our Holy Catholic Faith and teach them to live according to our customs. . . . This policy would also bring great gains, because the Indian population would, within a few years, be greatly increased; and since they would be Christians, and better instructed in our customs than they are at present, they would be more valuable subjects of Your Highness and Your descendants. If this policy is not followed, on the other hand, they will die out, and this will be a serious loss to Your Highness, to say nothing of the inhumanity of leaving Your vassals to die. There can be no doubt that this is what will happen; the present daily decline in numbers is an unmistakable warning. . . .

All the settlers of Hispaniola beg Your Highness to give them permission to import Negro slaves, because they say that the Indians do not provide them with enough labor to be able to support themselves there. . . . [I]t seemed to all of us [three monks who served as the island's governors] that it would be good for them to be imported, on condition that there be as many or more women as men and that they are brought straight from Africa, rather than being raised in Castile [Spain] or other places because those

Lucayas, they were disembarked and divided into lots, according to the size of the investment that each of the adventurers had made: the old with the young, the sick with the healthy (for many fell sick at sea, and even died of hunger, thirst, and close confinement below decks in that hot climate). In the lots, no attempt was made to keep together wives and husbands, nor parents and children; for no more account was made of them than if they had been indeed the lowest of animals.

Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España y islas de Tierra Firme*, publ. 1561

who are turn out great rogues. This will be a great benefit for Your Highness's revenues, which will otherwise decrease steadily, and it will relieve the Indians of much of their labor if they remain in *encomiendas* [government-created Indian settlements assigned to Spanish settlers]; also, the settlers will be more firmly rooted when they find that they have their own property, which cannot be taken away from them. If Your Highness decides that this should be conceded, it should be commanded that the blacks be brought from certain lands where their customs and conditions are known to be better and not from the others where they are usually bad.

Fray Bernardino de Manzanedo, Dispatch to King Charles I of Spain, 1518

