Linda M. Rupert

Creolization and Contraband: Curaçao in the Early Modern Atlantic World. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012. xii + 347 pp. (Paper US\$ 24.95)

The small island of Curaçao is something of an economic and demographic exception in the Caribbean, and its history harbors several unresolved historical problems. There were “plantations,” but they did not produce much sugar or coffee, and only a limited array of garden foods. It remains unclear whether the gardens were profitable or only served as a status symbol since their owners usually earned their money as merchants. The demography of the servile population of the island presents us with another historical riddle. Like the other islands in the region, Curaçao was the destination of a large number of slave ships. However, most of the imported slaves did not stay on the island, but were sold to the neighboring colonies. As a result, the slave population in Curaçao was smaller than that of the free population, and the number of slaves per owner was extremely small—not more than one or two, with only double digits in exceptional cases. In contrast to virtually all other colonies in the Caribbean, the number of slave ships arriving from Africa declined over time, and the last cargo of African slaves landed on the island in 1775. Elsewhere in the region, the ending of the slave imports would have resulted in a steady reduction of the slave population as the number of births among this group was usually lower than the number of deaths. On Curaçao, however, there is no indication of such a demographic decline.

All these exceptions made Curaçao a unique economy *cum* society, as it did not experience the dramatic economic growth that characterized plantation colonies elsewhere in the Caribbean. On first sight it seems puzzling that an increasing number of inhabitants—both free and slave—could make a living on the island, and that the Dutch West India Company (WIC) held on to Curaçao while it let go of much more promising colonial ventures such as New Netherlands in North America and New Holland in Brazil. In fact, the WIC had conquered Curaçao in 1634 because its excellent harbor was seen as an ideal stopover between these two Dutch possessions. Once this “grand design” failed, the economic prospects of Curaçao looked dim. But as this study demonstrates, the barren island succeeded in achieving economic growth with only a minor contribution from slavery by becoming a commercial center in its own right based on a regional network of mainly illegal trade connections.

Curaçao's commercial networks are carefully documented in this study. Linda Rupert shows that the island developed into a unique free port in the area and that behind the official façade of Dutch colonial rule there existed another world inhabited by local traders with their own commercial code,

their own creole language, and their own regional networks that would never have come to light by just studying the trade between Curaçao and the Dutch Republic. The majority of this “subaltern” group consisted of Sephardic Jews who continued living on the island, while other colonists usually considered their stay as temporary.

In order to prove her point that Curaçao was a major—if not *the* major—international port in the region, Rupert shows that the Amerindians in pre-Columbian times already used Curaçao as a trading hub, profiting from its geographical location close to the Venezuelan coast. This geographical advantage gained even more weight after the establishment of Spanish colonial rule, allowing the Curaçao merchants to disregard the laws that prohibited third parties from trading with the Spanish colonial possessions unless licensed by Madrid. Later Curaçao and the Dutch island of St. Eustatius developed an active trade with the French and English colonies with a similar disregard for the mercantilist rules and regulations. Contraband became the economic life-line of Curacao, creating a second mercantile group that stood apart from the dominant elite of the Protestant, Dutch-speaking officials and merchants. The novelty of this book lies in the detailed information about the symbiotic relationship between Curaçao and the nearby areas on the Venezuelan mainland.

In assessing the economic importance of Curaçao in the Dutch transatlantic trade, Rupert calculates that Curacao contributed a yearly average of about 3 million guilders per year during the 1740s, about half of the value of all transatlantic trade to the Dutch republic. These figures seem to underline the main thesis of this book about the dynamism of both the inter-Caribbean and transatlantic trades and the pivotal role of Curaçao in both. However, she is rather reticent about the fact that during the second half of the eighteenth century, the explosive growth of the Dutch and foreign plantation colonies reduced the relative economic importance of Curaçao for the Dutch Republic, while the Bourbon reforms and the liberalization of trade in Spanish America diminished Curaçao's earning potential. Free ports were no longer the exception in the region, and in the last decades of the eighteenth century, Curaçao plunged into a prolonged period of economic decline.

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