
Erin Stone offers a balanced account of an important topic that scholars of early Spanish American history, especially Anglophone ones, have largely neglected: the large-scale enslavement and relocation of Indigenous people which took place as Spaniards and other Europeans occupied and sought to extend control over the islands of the Caribbean and surrounding mainland. She traces several stages in the development and expansion of this enormously destructive appropriation of Indigenous lives, which was rooted in the sometimes contradictory objectives of European conquerors; the acquisition of Indigenous captives could be the object of conquest but also its byproduct, as Spaniards and others forced the Native people with whom they came into contact to act as guides, interpreters, and bearers for their many raids and expeditions. Those conscripts, if they survived the terrible rigors of capture, hunger, and forced marches in harrowing campaigns, often found themselves at the conclusion even further removed from their homes—possibly shipped to Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, or Cuba—, branded, and sold for a handful of pesos.

Stone addresses the origins of what became both a substantial enterprise and a source of labor for Spanish settlers, notwithstanding Queen Isabel’s repudiation of the notion of enslaving the Indigenous people of the Indies (as the Spaniards called the territories), whom she claimed to be her vassals. The laws regarding the enslavement of, and trade in, Indigenous people changed constantly, and their inconsistencies left plenty of room for ambitious entrepreneurs—among whom figured many of the Spanish Caribbean’s earliest and most prominent residents and officials—to become active participants in the trade. The existence of other institutions to exploit Indigenous labor, notably the establishment of the repartimiento (later known as encomienda) and the assignment of permanent servile status to people labeled naborías, blurred the distinctions in status and origin among the various Indigenous people who labored for the Spaniards. The latter called them all indios and probably often treated them similarly, notwithstanding the legal distinctions in their status. Stone pays due attention to the context in which the trade developed and the tepid efforts made to mitigate the colonists’ greatest excesses in their treatment of the Indians as embodied in the Laws of Burgos (1512, amended 1513) and the vague charges given to the Jeronymite governors dispatched by the regent Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros to Hispaniola in 1517. Their tenure was brief and they accomplished little in the way of significant reform.
An important aspect of this history is the impact of Spaniards’ shifting and expanding geographical focus and objectives on the Native peoples of the areas that they contacted as they moved from the islands of the Greater Antilles toward and into the mainland. As they did so they encountered more mobile groups whom they labeled Caribs and characterized as hostile, allowing them to justify the use of force against them and the seizure of captives. The quest for captives to be sold as slaves to provide labor in places where Indigenous populations were rapidly diminishing sometimes was the prime motivation for Spanish expeditions to new territories, while at other times the acquisition of captives to be sold was the poor reward for expeditions that failed to yield greater benefits for participants. The exchange of thousands of Indigenous slaves captured in raids and conflicts in Pánuco (New Spain) and Yucatan for livestock bred in Hispaniola, Cuba, or Puerto Rico is well documented. Pearl fisheries in the southern Caribbean required a specialized kind of labor, also provided by enslaved Natives. By the late 1520s, “the Indian slave trade was an enterprise of its own” (p. 101), and Indigenous lives were increasingly commodified.

Stone offers some figures for the number of Natives who experienced the violent dislocations and brutality of the slave trade, but makes clear that because of the gaps and inconsistencies of the records for the period it is not possible to provide reliable numbers. Nonetheless her account provides valuable insights into the patterns and consequences of the trade. Nearly all the Lucayan people of the Bahama Islands (considered “useless” because they had no gold) were removed and sold in the Greater Antilles, and elsewhere the disruptions caused by Spanish raids and entradas went far beyond the damage caused by the taking of captives. Scholarship further exploring the timing and impact of the Indigenous slave trade in various places will hopefully follow, but Stone has provided an important starting point from which to engage the topic and its many extensions and implications.

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