STRATEGIES OF ADJUSTMENT: SPANISH DEFENSE OF THE CIRCUM-CARIBBEAN COLONIES, 1493–1600

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Introduction

The late fifteenth century was a period of profound social, political, religious and economic transformation in Iberia. Ferdinand and Isabela’s defeat of Muslim forces at Granada in 1492 marked the successful completion of the seven-centuries long Iberian reconquista, as well as the beginning of a new era of religious homogenization and fervor. The reconquista also initiated the first steps toward the creation of a modern state military in Spain, which was in turn instrumental in realizing a period of unprecedented Spanish territorial expansion in Europe over the century following 1492.1

This essay is concerned with the ways in which American circumstances influenced Spanish military institutions in the circum-Caribbean colonies during the first stages of colonization (1493 to about 1600). Its perspective is informed from historical archaeology at military sites in the region, and the discussion is structured by three broad, roughly chronological themes, each of which shaped colonial Spanish military organization in specifically American ways.

The first of these is the military organization of initial confrontation and territorial control. Colonization, when colonizers are uninvited and unwelcome, involves the exercise of force. Accordingly, the arrival of Spaniards to America in the late fifteenth century, and their continuing expansion over the next three centuries, was marked nearly everywhere by violent encounters with resistant American people. In the broad modern sense of an undertaking authorized by its nation to use force, the initial conquest encounters were largely military ventures.

The second general theme addresses the defense and security of the newly established colonies. As the wealth of America was extracted and sent to Europe, it became necessary for Spain to prevent economic exploitation of the colonies by other European powers. This principally involved defending coastal ports and shipping lanes from corsairs, privateers and pirates, and this remained an enduring concern for Spain until the late eighteenth century.

Military adjustments in expansion and control of the frontier during the sixteenth century constitutes the third theme of this discussion. The *presidio*, for example, was a military institution developed to achieve this in direct response to frontier American circumstances.

*The Military in Spain at the End of the Fifteenth Century*

Much of the Reconquista campaign against the Moors was undertaken through partnerships between the Crown and private individuals who were awarded the title of *adelantado*. The adelantados generally carried out their campaigns with little or no financial support from the monarchs. They were rewarded for success, however, by receiving hereditary family governorship of conquered territories, along with rights to the labor of the Muslim peasants who occupied them. This institution, known as *repartimiento*, was simultaneously a punishment for the vanquished and a reward for the victors.

Crown resources for military protection of these frontier areas were scarce, and the settlers eventually agreed to provide labor and tribute to military *hidalgos* (minor nobility) in exchange for protection from frontier marauders and other enemies. Ferdinand codified the notion of local militias as the basis for defense in 1495, when he decreed that all men should have arms, and use them in defense of the king when necessary.²

The successful siege of Muslim Granada by the Catholic Kings offers an instructive example of Spanish military organization on the very eve of American colonization. Employing both medieval siege tactics and modern firepower, the Granada war has been invoked by some military historians as an unprecedented deployment of massed artillery in siege warfare, involving perhaps as many as 80,000 volunteer and international mercenary troops (including German, Swiss,