The Rise and Fall of the Transpacific Slave Trade

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In 1635, a young man from the Malabar Coast in India named Antonio arrived in Acapulco on board the ship Nuestra Señora de la Limpia Concepción.¹ His master, a Spanish resident of Cavite in the Philippines, had asked a sailor on the ship to take Antonio with him and sell Antonio on his behalf. The sale price upon landing was 200 pesos, paid by a slave trader who turned around and sold Antonio in Mexico City for almost double the price. The surviving documentation that details Antonio’s journey from Asia to Mexico reveals the many steps and intermediaries who were involved in the transpacific slave trade, as well as the profits that drove this commerce.

From the late 1560s through the early 1700s, individual traders brought slaves from the Philippines to Mexico aboard the ships of the Manila Galleon. This chapter examines the transpacific trade during a key period of transition for the larger slave trade to Spanish America, when slavers dealt in people from Asia and Africa. The slaves who crossed the Pacific were part of much larger influx of slaves to Spanish America.² As such, their story must be examined in the context of Spain’s effort, beginning in the sixteenth century, to supply the colonies with slave labor. This empire-wide framework allows for fruitful comparisons between the Pacific and the Atlantic trades. When they started, both operated under a licensing system, with the Atlantic trade shifting to a monopoly system in the late seventeenth century. During this transition, the Pacific remained open to individual traders, which threatened Atlantic interests. As late as 1680, the Spanish crown resisted the efforts of Atlantic traders to shut it down because it had a vested interest in maintaining some direct licensing privileges. It eventually became clear, however, that use of licenses made for a leaky system that allowed a great deal of contraband, which was against everyone’s interests, especially the crown’s, which lost duties. In time, the monopoly


¹ AGN Jesuitas 2–6 exp.32 (1635).
system prevailed in part because the companies were better able to deliver steady rents to the royal treasury and a somewhat regulated number of slaves.

The story of the transpacific slave trade serves as a unique lens for understanding the development of the larger trade to Spanish America. The period of the trade in the Pacific (late 1560s to early 1700s) indicates that the slave trade as a whole changed with the advent of the foreign asientos (monopoly companies), which worked out of West Africa. In this sense, the reorganization of the slave trade and the consolidation of supply networks in the Atlantic arena led to the Africanization of slavery at the end of the seventeenth century. In part, Africans became the consummate slaves in Spanish America because European companies that only traded in African slaves came to dominate the market. The end point also marks the larger study as a whole, which focuses on chino slaves (the general term for all slaves who traveled across the Pacific) in Mexico. After 1672, there was no market for the chinos, for the simple reason they could no longer be legally held as slaves in Spanish America. The end of the transpacific trade thus brings into focus the interconnectedness between these two stories: the rise of the monopoly slave trading companies and the end of non-African slavery in Spanish America.

The transpacific trade involved peoples from disparate places, including East Africa, Portuguese India, the Muslim sultanates of Southeast Asia, and the Spanish Philippines. Once the slaves arrived in Acapulco, they were categorized as either blacks (negros), also called cafres, or chinos. Many slaves, however, were not classified at all in the treasury records of incoming slaves, or in other kinds of documentation. It is therefore impossible to calculate the percentage of slaves who were from any one region. Any estimate of the overall trade must be understood as including both blacks and chinos. The surviving records only allow for the general observation that Africans became more numerous in the second half of the seventeenth century. Their increased numbers point to the critical shift emphasized in this study, which is that Africans became the sole people who could be legally sold at market throughout the Spanish

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3 The word cafre stemmed from the Portuguese cáfer, which in turn derived from the Arabic káfir for pagan. It was used to refer to black slaves from all parts of Africa.

4 The records of the royal treasury at Acapulco from 1590 to 1760 are found in AGI Contaduría, volumes 897 to 907.

5 For example, in 1682, don Tomás Mendayas purchased a negro named Antonio Ramos in the Philippines to serve him on his journey to Mexico and sold him on arrival. AGN Historia 408 f.178r (1682). Similarly, the Italian chronicler Gemelli Careri was accompanied by an African slave in 1696. Giovanni Francesco Gemelli Careri, Viaje a La Nueva España, trans. Francisca Perujo (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1976), 12.