

# American Globalization, 1492–1850

Trans-Cultural Consumption in Spanish  
Latin America

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## Chapter 1

### Trans-Imperial, Transnational and Decentralized: The Traffic of African Slaves to Spanish America and Across the Isthmus of Panama, 1508–1651

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# 1 Trans-Imperial, Transnational and Decentralized

## The Traffic of African Slaves to Spanish America and Across the Isthmus of Panama, 1508–1651

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### Introduction

Spanish America was the destination of the first and the last ships loaded with slaves that crossed the Atlantic between the early sixteenth century and the mid-nineteenth century. Recent studies estimate that this traffic was responsible for the forced migration of at least two million people from Africa to Spanish America, the Spanish colonies being the second most important American destination after Brazil (Borucki, Eltis, and Wheat 2015). The effects of the slave trade varied widely in Spanish America. They led to the diversification of the population of the American continent and the appearance of new groups of hybrid origin, as well as the emergence of new social identities, cultural forms and consumer behavior. From an economic point of view, we still lack a study that concerns itself with measuring the commercial impact of the African slave trade compared to the trade of other products or goods in the Spanish empire, or estimating the effects of the arrival of forced labor on the colony's economy. It is not our purpose here to resolve such matters; nonetheless, it is important to emphasize that the Spanish colonization of the Americas was viable thanks to the contribution of populations of African origin. In this sense, the colonization of America also turned out to be a process of Africanization of the continent (Wheat 2016).

The trafficking of African slaves to Spanish America remains largely unknown today by comparison with the trade in goods and merchandise that developed between Spain and its American colonies through the Carrera de Indias, or the slave trafficking systems set up by other empires of the Atlantic world. This chapter traces the main lines of the political economy of the African slave trade to Spanish America and its specific characteristics as a commercial endeavor. Three elements characterized the slave trade in comparison to the regular Atlantic trade in goods and merchandise to Spanish America through the Carrera de Indias system. First, the routes that supplied slaves to Spanish America

were of a trans-imperial nature. Second, the merchant networks controlling this infamous trade had a strong transnational component. Third, the shipping of slaves was highly decentralized with respect to Spain. These three key elements underpinned the structure of the slave trade to Spanish America for more than three centuries (Mendes 2008; Borucki 2012; Delgado Ribas 2013). A focus on these three aspects should help us better understand the various distribution mechanisms set up in the “New World” for the introduction of enslaved people, new products and goods, whose conditioning factors tended to vary considerably.

The following pages concentrate on the period that runs from the early sixteenth century to the mid-seventeenth century and represents the golden age of the Iberian empires’ slave trade in the Atlantic. During this period, the Portuguese and Spanish empires laid the foundations for the transatlantic slave trade and were its main protagonists, both in terms of the supply of African slave labor and in relation to market demand from America. With the Isthmus of Panama as its main geographic reference, this chapter is divided into three sections. First, we present the irreplaceable role played by the African population in the conquest and colonization of this Isthmus of Panama, which was the main route connecting the Atlantic and the Pacific Ocean in the framework of the Spanish empire during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Next, we explain the commercial structure surrounding the importation of African slaves to this area. The third section analyzes in detail the decade of the 1640s, which registered an unusual fall-off in the volume of African slaves officially arriving in Spanish America and a major restructuring of the trafficking routes. An analysis of the reasons for these changes and the way in which different cities of the colonial sphere, such as Panama, reacted to the diminished supply of slaves sheds light on two issues that often go unnoticed. Firstly, the importance of trans-imperialism, transnationalism and decentralization in fashioning the African slave trade to Spanish America; and secondly, the distinctive characteristics of this traffic within the overall framework of the Spanish empire’s political economy in the Atlantic and in comparison to trade in other goods or products.

### **The Africanization of the Isthmus of Panama**

Unlike other trades destined for Spanish America, the demand for African slaves manifested itself very early on, as it was linked to structural changes in the economy from the time of the conquest. African slaves were the involuntary protagonists of a transatlantic trade that decisively transformed the Americas. So much so that, in the words of David Wheat, the population of African origin operated as “surrogate colonists” in Spanish America (Wheat 2016). From the slaves to the free blacks, including the local population of African descent (known as *criollos*), these social actors carried out a multitude of tasks that were vital for the conquest of

Spanish America and the viability of the colony (Vinson 2001; McKnight and Garofalo 2010; O'Toole 2012; Restall 2013; Bryant 2014; Borucki 2015). The region of Panama provides one of the best examples of the importance of the African forced migrants in taking control and developing a Spanish imperial presence in the Americas.

The first African slaves possibly were brought to the Isthmus of Panama in 1508 with the expedition of Diego de Nicuesa (Tardieu 2009, 42). During the twenty years following the foundation of the first Spanish settlements on the isthmus, Nombre de Dios (1508) and Santa María del Darién (1510), the indigenous population was almost entirely wiped out due to violent clashes with European settlers and the arrival of new pathogens. The first expeditions organized from Panama City to Nicaragua and Peru also transported indigenous slaves, thus contributing to the decline of the native Panamanian population. In the opinion of Governor Francisco de Barrionuevo, by 1533 there were only 500 indigenous people left in the area surrounding Panama City (Mena García 1984, 78).

The shortage of indigenous slave labor on the Isthmus of Panama was already evident during the early 1520s, and created a strong demand for forced labor to the area. That demand was met by developing an inter-American slave trade from Nicaragua to the Isthmus of Panama, with indigenous people enslaved as victims (Radell 1976; Sherman 1979; Newson 1982). However, as the demand for slave labor was much higher than the existing supply in Central America, the transatlantic slave trade quickly became the main source for enslaved workers. In 1523 a ship with a cargo of five hundred African captives landed and in 1525 an additional thousand African slaves were brought to the isthmus (Ward 1993, 35). In 1531 the Panama City Council asked the Crown for privileges so that more African slaves could be sent to the region in order to support the colonization process (Jopling 1994, 113–15).

The demand for African slave labor in the region of Panama was especially strong in comparison to other parts of Spanish America. At first, the implementation of systems known as *encomiendas*, for organizing indigenous labor to support the Spanish settlers, was an incentive for the conquistadores of the Isthmus of Panama. However, the number of natives integrated into the Panamanian *encomiendas* was low by comparison with other areas. This meant that, for example, the Panamanian *encomenderos* (those granted control of the *encomiendas*) never reached anything like the power or the control of such large native workforces as their peers in the valleys of Peru. From the mid-sixteenth century the influence of the Panamanian *encomenderos* was in decline, while local government officials and traders stood out as the main local power group (Mena García 1984, 176–245). Moreover, according to some authors, the suppression of indigenous slavery in the mid-sixteenth century did not have any pronounced influence on the local economy and the productive sectors of the colony; nor did the taxes paid by the natives have

any notable importance on the tax revenue of the Panamanian Audiencia (Mena García 1984, 324, 325). All these factors show the extent to which African slaves had a prominent role in the establishment of the first colonial structures on the Isthmus of Panama and their subsequent development.

The strong demand for slave labor on the Isthmus of Panama during the first decades of colonization led to an important upsurge in the trade in African captives, which affected the demographics of the isthmus. In a few years the population of African origin had superseded the indigenous population as the main human group in areas under Spanish influence. In 1575 it was estimated that there were about 6,000 African slaves within the Audiencia of Panama. Nearly 2,500 of these were concentrated in Panama City (Mena García 1984, 91). By 1607 the slave population of the city had increased to almost 3,700. Together with the free blacks – about seven hundred and fifty – the population of African origin represented almost eighty percent of the total inhabitants of the city.<sup>2</sup> These numbers registered a steady increase over the years. At the end of the 1620s and the outset of the 1630s, there were several accounts of 14,000 African slaves in the region.<sup>3</sup> By the 1640s, the figure was estimated to be have reached 17,000 (Vila Vilar 1976, 175).

African slaves sustained the transport and service sectors, which were the main industries of the area of Panama. The importance of this region in the geopolitics of the Spanish empire was largely due to its role as a junction connecting Spain and the Atlantic trade routes to South Pacific America. The strategic value of the Isthmus of Panama was inestimable as the first stop for Potosí silver from Bolivia on its global journey to Asia via Spain, whose circulation gave rise to one of the most incisive processes in the emergence of globalization (Flynn, Giráldez, and Von Glahn 2003). In 1561, the Crown and the Seville merchants' guild established an annual convoy, known as the fleets and galleons system, connecting Spain with Cartagena de Indias, the Isthmus of Panama and Veracruz. The fleets and galleons system brought stability to the trade fairs celebrated in Nombre de Dios and subsequently, following the destruction of the town by Francis Drake in 1596, at the new settlement of Portobelo (1597), which became a crucial trading centre where Peruvian and Spanish merchants met (Castillero Calvo 1980; Vila Vilar 1982). The extremely difficult eighty kilometers of mountains, rivers, mudflats and tropical jungle that separated the Caribbean port of Portobelo from Panama City on the Pacific Ocean were negotiated by the Panamanian transporters through the forced employment of African slaves to transport goods and precious metals by mule-pack (Castillero Calvo 1980; Mena García 1984).

As a producer of goods and products, the importance of the isthmus was marginal, both in the Spanish-American colonial economy and in the overall economy of the Spanish empire. However, African slaves

were crucial to sustaining the productive activities developed in the rural areas of the isthmus. They were in charge of raising livestock and were employed in the gold mines, the pearl fisheries and the sawmills and in wood harvesting, field work, and the maintenance and upkeep of the roads and the construction of Panama's military defenses (Mena García 1984, 389–400).

The work performed by African slaves in the city of Panama was concentrated in domestic service and the building sector, while free blacks were employed in various trades, from artisans to public notaries, despite the fact that their skin color could be considered a formal disadvantage (Espelt Bombín 2014). For example, in 1650 Manuel Botaccio Grilo, a mestizo, acceded to the post of notary public in Panama City after several years.<sup>4</sup>

The presence of people of African origin in the cities of the isthmus was not only appreciable in terms of their numbers and the activities they developed, but also in the structure and naming of urban developments. For example, in 1607 there were four suburbs or neighborhoods in the outskirts of Portobelo in which the majority of the population was of African origin. The district of Triana was where the king's slaves dwelt and were employed by the local authorities, while it was said that the Carnicería district was inhabited by blacks and people of mixed race. A third suburb was called Guinea, in direct reference to the origin of its inhabitants.<sup>5</sup>

People of African origin in the towns of the isthmus joined and founded religious confraternities through which they engaged in civil and religious activities. In his description of the bishopric of Panama City in 1650, Friar Hernando Ramírez pointed out that of the six existing confraternities in Portobelo, the one of San Pablo had a large membership of people of mixed race and blacks. This also occurred in the town of Natá with the San Sebastián confraternity of the *criollo* slaves and in Panama City with the confraternity of Nuestra del Rosario de negros *congos*, which was established in the convent of Santo Domingo.<sup>6</sup>

Another aspect that shaped the Africanization of the Isthmus of Panama was the expansion of communities of runaway slaves known as maroons. The maroon population developed a parallel society that competed for the natural and economic resources of the isthmus and were especially active from the 1550s through the 1580s (Pike 2007; Tardieu 2009). The so-called Kingdom of Bayano around the Chepo River, was a stronghold of the rebels for decades. According to the contemporary accounts of Alonso Criado de Castilla, in 1575 almost half of the black population of the Isthmus of Panama – around 2,500 inhabitants – lived in maroon communities (Mena García 1984, 52, 426). Faced with the alarming rise of the maroon population, the crown issued a decree prohibiting the sale of slaves on the isthmus for fear that the new captives would swell the ranks of the rebels (Bowser 1974, 63; Pike 2007, 265, 266).

## **The Transatlantic Slave Trade in the Context of the Spanish Atlantic**

The transatlantic slave trade was organized as a very particular business compared to other trades to Spanish America, both in terms of the routes it took and the profile of its merchants (O'Malley and Borucki 2017; Borucki, Eltis, and Wheat 2020). The bulk of the commercial activity between Spain and Spanish America was channeled through the *Carrera de Indias*. The *Carrera de Indias* consisted of a circuit of navigation connecting ports on the Spanish mainland – Seville initially and Cádiz from the end of the seventeenth century – and the American ports of Cartagena de Indias, the Isthmus of Panama – Nombre de Dios until 1596 and Portobelo after that – and Veracruz. From the mid-sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries, navigation was organized through a convoy system that operated annually or every two years. Most of the products and goods travelling from Spain to Spanish America, whether they had been produced in Spain or not, travelled through the *Carrera de Indias* trading system. Therefore, while the *Carrera de Indias* represented trade routes that ran within the limits of the Spanish empire, the African slave trade to Spanish America surpassed them. As the Spanish empire never developed a system of factories and garrisons in sub-Saharan Africa, the slaves transported to Spanish America were dispatched from territories claimed by other empires of the Atlantic world.

The trans-imperial character of the African slave trade had an impact on the shipping patterns adopted by the slave traders. Slave traders sailed with greater flexibility compared to the merchants who operated through the *Carrera de Indias* convoy system, which connected established ports once a year at best. Between the 1590s and 1630s, the ports of Cartagena de Indias and Veracruz, and at times Buenos Aires, were the only ones officially authorized to receive slave ships from Africa (Wheat 2011; Schultz 2015; Sierra Silva 2017). The Spanish authorities encouraged adapting the geography of the slave trade to the routes of the *Carrera de Indias*. However, the difficulties that the authorities had in controlling the navigation of the slave ships meant that the final decision on the port of arrival was in the hands of the ships' captains. On the other hand, the cargo holds on the licensed slave ships that travelled to Spanish America contained many products in addition to the slaves. Soon the official slave trade became a legal cover, with many of these ships carrying more contraband goods than slaves. These trading and shipping practices mirrored the transatlantic and trans-imperial exchanges carried out by vessels involved in the business of slave smuggling. Several documents point to the widespread development and momentum of the illegal slave trade. For example, in 1566 an order was issued from Spain urging authorities throughout the Spanish Caribbean, from Mexico to Venezuela via Panama, to take action against the smuggling of slaves and merchandise

by unlicensed Portuguese ships.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, the slave trade facilitated the development of supply chains for trade in slaves and products of various kinds between different regions within the empire and beyond, often regardless of the official trading routes endorsed by the *Carrera de Indias*.

The profile of the merchants running the African slave trade was characterized by a strong transnational component. The businesses of the *Carrera de Indias* had a strong presence of foreign products and capital as in assets. The rules and laws of the *Carrera de Indias* allowed trading in goods produced beyond the borders of the empire, but direct participation of foreign merchants was restricted. Leaving contraband to one side, foreign merchants frequently employed Spanish intermediaries or purchased citizenship that allowed them to participate more directly in official trade. However, the slave trade was very different. From the early days of American colonization, Spanish merchants played a very discreet role in the slave trade and the Crown did not oppose the participation of foreign merchants in this trade. The main protagonists of the slave trade to Spanish America were, on the other hand, merchants who were not even subjects of the empire, such as the Genoese, Portuguese, Dutch, French and English.

The Crown and the authorities in charge of the organization of the commerce and the navigation to Spanish America – the *Consejo de Indias* in Madrid, and the *Casa de la Contratación* in Seville – not only accepted the fact that the official trafficking of slaves had become a trans-imperial, transnational and decentralized activity; they also obtained direct income in Spain through the sale of licenses to participate in the slave trade. From the 1520s until the 1630s, the Crown launched a controlled market of licenses to participate in the official slave trade. During most of this period, licenses were issued by the *Casa de la Contratación* in Seville, while between 1595 and 1640 the marketing of the licenses was outsourced to private companies, all of Portuguese origin. Later on, from the 1660s to the 1740s, this system changed, and monopolies to introduce slaves were leased to specific companies (Delgado Ribas 2013).

Portuguese merchants and their political leaders soon discovered that the demand for African slaves in the Spanish American colonies meant a lucrative and steady business. From 1534, the crown of Portugal officially allowed the direct export of slaves from Cape Verde and São Tomé to Spanish America (Mendes 2008, 66). The interest of the Portuguese Crown in fostering the slave trade to Spanish America complemented the Spanish kings' interest in cooperation with Portuguese slave traders. For instance, in 1541 Charles V signed a contract with the Torres brothers' Portuguese company to send slaves to America, and in 1556 Philip II contracted Manuel Caldeira to import 2,000 slaves from the Cape Verde Islands (Mendes 2008, 74; Delgado Ribas 2013, 17, 18).

Until the mid-seventeenth century, the Portuguese were better positioned than merchants of other origins to take control of this trade in



African captives. In the first place, they were well established in Seville, the main Spanish port from where Atlantic trade and navigation was channeled (Pérez García and Fernández Chaves 2009; Fernández Chaves and Pérez García 2010). They not only had physical access to sources of slavery in Africa and the familiarity necessary to interfere in inter-cultural trade with local leaders, they also had sufficient capital to organize transatlantic expeditions and the human resources to negotiate them through all the traffic segments, from Portugal and Spain to Africa, from there to Spanish America and from Spanish America to the Iberian Peninsula (Studnicki-Gizbert 2007; Green 2012; Hicks 2017). Consequently, from the early decades of the sixteenth century until the 1630s, the supply of slaves to Spanish America was strongly linked to the fate of Portuguese expansion in Africa. The Portuguese factories in Cabo Verde, the Gulf of Guinea and later in Angola were the ports of origin for the ships crossing the Atlantic that provided slave labor for the Spanish colonization of America. As a result, the arrival of different African ethnic groups in Spanish America was tied to the evolution of the Portuguese presence in Africa (Wheat 2011).

The Portuguese and Spanish empires were united under the Habsburg crown between 1580 and 1640. Although the two empires maintained their respective legal entities, laws and traditions, the new political context facilitated the movement of Iberian subjects throughout the combined Atlantic possessions of the two empires (Subrahmanyam 2007). Therefore, participation in the slave trade became the main Portuguese means of access into Spanish American markets. From 1595, the same entrepreneurs who leased out the Portuguese factories in Africa from where the slaves were removed also took control of the slave transport licenses to Spanish America (Vila Vilar 1977). Therefore, for nearly 50 years merchants of Portuguese origin virtually dominated the importation of slaves into Spanish America, from Mexico to Buenos Aires (Assadourian 1966; Newson and Minchin 2007; Eagle 2013; Lokken 2013; Schultz 2017; Sierra Silva 2018). As a trans-imperial activity, the slave trade to Spanish America benefited especially from the union of both empires, boosting its role as a “commodity chain” that created a series of links that would soon prove crucial in the functioning of the empire.

The slave trade to the Isthmus of Panama developed along those lines from the early sixteenth century to the mid-seventeenth century. Within the Spanish American slave trade circuits, the Isthmus of Panama provided a port that became involved in the intra-imperial and inter-American routes. The ships that originated in Africa and had made the transatlantic crossing would sell or deposit their cargoes of slaves along the Atlantic seaboard from whence they were redistributed to the American viceroalties together with other products. From the 1570s onwards, the port of Cartagena de Indias began to emerge as the main redistributive center for slaves in Spanish America and hosted a growing community of

Portuguese slave traders (Vidal Ortega 2002). Between 1595 and 1640 more than half of all the slaves who were taken to the Caribbean had landed in Cartagena de Indias, some 157,000 people.<sup>8</sup> During this period it is estimated that between 1,000 and 1,500 slaves were taken annually from Cartagena de Indias to Portobelo (Bowser 1974, 78).

In 1607, according to the president of the Audiencia of Panama, the slave trade was described as the richest and most constant trade in the region where “everything is done by means of Portuguese”.<sup>9</sup> In that same year, it was recorded that there were thirty-one Portuguese residents in Panama, representing the main community of foreigners in the city, twice as many as the Italians, who constituted the second largest group.<sup>10</sup> To a large extent, slave traders who settled on the isthmus turned out to be agents of companies based in Cartagena de Indias or in Lima. Their work on the isthmus involved coordinating the large slave trade linking those two cities with the Isthmus of Panama as an intermediate stop. However, traders investing in slaves also became involved in other activities, availing themselves of the opportunities the isthmus offered as the focal point for the transshipment of merchandise and precious metals from Peru and Spain (Bowser 1974, 60, 63, 64; Newson and Minchin 2007, 193–95).

The strong Portuguese presence in Spanish America and the remarkable economic dynamism of Portuguese slave traders elicited widespread hostility and misgivings from certain Spanish American merchants. Many local traders perceived the Portuguese as foreigners and as an economic, religious and even a political threat to their interests and the integrity of the empire. For example, the 1607 report that pointed to the iron-fisted control that the Portuguese exercised over the slave trade in Panama highlighted that many of those traders had left the Indies to join forces with other merchants living in the Italian Jewish quarters of Rome and Ferrara and that investigations carried out there by the Inquisition had revealed these Portuguese subjects to be Judaizers.<sup>11</sup>

Mistrust of the Portuguese traders crystalized in the inquisitorial offensive unleashed in Cartagena de Indias (1636–1638), Lima (1635–1641) and Mexico (1642–1649) that put an end to the networks set up by the Portuguese as a result of the slave trade. Most of those accused of being Judaizers were merchants of different ranks, the most prominent being those linked to slave trafficking, such as Manuel Fonseca Enríquez, Blas Paz de Pinto and Juan Rodríguez Mesa, all of them based at Cartagena de Indias, and Manuel Bautista Pérez, based at Lima. Many of these merchants were captured between Panama City and Portobelo, like Jorge de Espinosa, who was arrested in 1635 while trying to buy goods and slaves for 12,435 pesos. A similar fate befell Enrique Lorenzo, who had specialized in the slave trade between Cartagena de Indias and Portobelo, and Luis de Lima, who was an agent for other Peruvian merchants (Quiroz 1985).

## **The Suspension of Official Slave Trading During the 1640s**

Between 1640 and 1651 the official slave trade to Spanish America was suspended (Vila Vilar 1976; Schwartz 1993). The reasons for that suspension further highlight the specific characteristics of the slave trade to the colonies in comparison with the ways through which other transatlantic trades took place. On 1 December 1640, the Duke of Braganza initiated a revolt that sought to remove Philip IV from the Portuguese throne. The monarch also reigned over the Spanish empire. Thus began a conflict between the two Iberian empires that was to continue until 1668, spanning the zenith of the global expansion of the Spanish and Portuguese empires. As news of the uprising in Portugal spread, so too did conjecture about the position that the Portuguese communities would adopt in Spain and its American colonies. At first, no specific measures were taken to expel the Portuguese from the Spanish Indies; however the adoption of certain practices reflected the bellicose situation, such as barring Portuguese ships from mooring at the Spanish American ports on the 1 January 1641.<sup>12</sup> The Crown of Castile did not fill the gap left by the Portuguese by permitting merchants of other nationalities to trade in Spanish America, nor did it allow Spanish merchants to sail directly to Africa to lead the slave trade. This combination of factors implied the suspension of the slave trade to Spanish America, which had been dominated by Portuguese merchants since the end of the sixteenth century.

The war between these empires disrupted the slave trade and further fueled the mistrust, palpable since the 1630s, towards the very dynamic community of Portuguese merchants, often perceived as foreigners, in Spanish America. During the 1640s, the activities of the Portuguese in Spanish America were severely curtailed by the authorities. In the Panamanian case, in May 1645 a royal decree was issued from Spain recommending that the Audiencia of Panama expel Portuguese subjects in Panama City and Portobelo to the interior of the province or, failing that, to Lima.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, having carried out their own investigations, the local authorities pronounced that the Portuguese residents did not represent any threat to the interests of the Crown as they did not keep any ties with Portugal.<sup>14</sup> Something similar happened in March 1649, when an edict was issued in the main urban centers of the Isthmus of Panama – Panama, Portobelo, Villa de los Santos and Natá – that the inhabitants of Portuguese origin be identified on “pain of life and loss of their property applied to the Chamber of His Majesty”. In total, eighty-seven male adults were counted. Since most of them belonged to the lower-income bracket and there was no suspicion of any commercial links with the Portuguese Empire or the slave trade, none of them was expelled.<sup>15</sup> The truth is that, within this context of war, one of Spain’s main interests was to dismantle the Portuguese slave trade networks that included related

circular trade links for various products across the two empires between the Iberian Peninsula, Africa and Spanish America. The expulsion of the Portuguese Juan Baeza from Panama City in 1646 and the seizure of his property were justified on the grounds of his business with conationals on the Iberian mainland.<sup>16</sup>

From 1643 the Council of the Indies began to receive letters and briefs from various points in Spanish America specifically referring to the lack of African slaves or including it as one of the main topics. Individuals, councils, presidents of Audiencias and viceroys all described to what extent and how the suspension of official slave traffic affected the day-to-day running of their cities and provinces. The complaints raised by the cities underscored the importance of the slave trade to the different local economies of Spanish America. These reports show the Spanish American economies' incapacity to replace the African workforce, and therefore the extent to which Spanish America depended upon the slave trade, which was necessarily trans-imperial.

The main Spanish American mining centers, which were vital for the functioning of the empire, expressed their concern on numerous occasions. In 1645, the *corregidor* of La Plata y Potosí, don Juan Velarde Treviño Fernández, complained of the lack of black slaves in those areas.<sup>17</sup> Although African slaves rarely worked as silver miners, they were vital in blacksmithing, shoemaking and driving llama trains, among other crafts that supported the mining economy. Two years later another report reached the Council of the Indies, with the request for Buenos Aires to become an official port for the slave trade from which to supply the Potosí area with African forced labor.<sup>18</sup> In 1647, the Audiencia of Charcas estimated 1,000 slaves to be the ideal number to meet the labor needs of the region: in the vineyards, the wheat plantations, the sugar mills and the gold mines of Carabaya (now Peru).<sup>19</sup> Things were not going any better in Mexico. By the summer of 1647, the *corregidores* of Zacatecas and the treasurers of the hacienda of San Luis Potosi had already written at least three letters on the decline in mining activities and the consequent fall in the tax known as the *quinto real* (or "King's fifth") due to the impossibility of bringing new recruits to the mines.<sup>20</sup> A year later, in 1648, the president of the Audiencia of Guadalajara began to insist on the same subject and in 1651 the Viceroy of Mexico requested the dispatch of at least 1,000 African slaves.<sup>21</sup>

The representatives of Cartagena de Indias, the city that had become the main port of destination for African slaves in Spanish America since the late sixteenth century, also showed their discontent to the Crown. The information emanating from Cartagena de Indias was twofold: on the one hand, it indicated a stagnation of agricultural activities in rural areas and mining in the interior areas of Santa Fe and Zaragoza, while on the other hand there were reports focusing on the decline in the port's commercial dynamism and the consequent fall in tax collection.<sup>22</sup> According

to the Cartagena de Indias town council, one of the keys to relaunching the slave trade with the participation of local merchants was to formalize the exchanges of merchandise that went hand in hand with the transatlantic slave trade. Their proposal was that the slave ships could leave Cartagena de Indias for the Canary Islands with local products. These would be sold there and exchanged for local wines and other goods to be finally exchanged for slaves on the coasts of Africa. Moreover, Cartagena's council advocated further decentralizing the slave trade by replacing the system of issuing licenses in Spain for slave trafficking with an alternative model of free participation in exchange for the payment of taxes in Spanish America on disembarkation.<sup>23</sup>

The reports written from Lima detail how the viability and endurance of the prosperous Peruvian economy relied on the African slave trade. According to Joseph de los Rios y Barrios, *procurador* for Lima in Madrid, the effects of five years without access to *bozales* slaves (those arriving directly from Africa), were estimated in losses of almost eight million pesos, affecting all types of crops, farms and industries.<sup>24</sup> According to other descriptions, the smallest, most usual type of rural hacienda in Peru required between ten and twelve slaves. Medium-sized holdings could need between fifty and a hundred slaves and the largest ones up to 200.<sup>25</sup> Thus, according to observers from Lima, the annual flow of African slaves needed to satisfy the Peruvian demand distributed between Lima, the Nazca Valley, Arequipa, Cuzco and even Potosi ranged between 1,500 and 2,000 captives.<sup>26</sup>

In the more discrete Panamanian economy, agricultural production and transport were identified as the sectors most affected by the lack of slave labor. By 1645, corn crops, honey production and market crops had completely declined to the point that, according to reports, the price of vegetables had increased threefold. The lack of slaves tending cattle limited meat production to meet the needs of Panama City and Portobelo and the additional high demand each time the fleet of galleons reached the shores of the isthmus. The sawmills had been stripped of manpower, and this reduced labor force also affected the provision of boats and hammocks.<sup>27</sup> Other reports point to a crisis in the maritime sector, both in terms of navigation and the exploitation of marine resources. For example, while forty boats had been involved in fishing at the end of the 1630s, the figure had decreased to sixteen by the middle of the following decade.<sup>28</sup> Slave labor was reported to be crucial for the maintenance of the fortress system in Portobelo and for security in general throughout the isthmus, as the companies in charge of repelling the constant attacks from the maroons relied largely on the contribution of the African slaves.<sup>29</sup>

From a broader perspective, the Panamanian authorities underlined the way in which the lack of slave labor in one region of Spanish America could have repercussions in another. It was reported, for example, that

the decline in wheat and corn crops in Peru due to the shortage of African slaves had brought about a fall in flour imports to Panama and had almost doubled the price of bread.<sup>30</sup> The provision of other basic products such as tallow, butter, tobacco, chickpeas, beans and rice had also dropped. To complicate things further, a fire in 1644 had destroyed the food supplies in storage in Panama City.<sup>31</sup> In sum, slave trafficking had provided labor that was fundamental for the manufacture of products and the launching of services that in turn generated other types of businesses in Spanish America and across the empire.

Although the slave trade was officially suspended during the 1640s, some slave merchants continued to cross the Atlantic to supply Spanish America. The fact that trafficking was no longer official makes it difficult, but not impossible, to trace its activities in the archives. In the case of the Isthmus of Panama, in August 1641, the royal officials of the Audiencia of Panama sent 13,250 pesos to Spain obtained from the sale of about forty-four slaves who had arrived from Providence Island.<sup>32</sup> That same year another ship with a cargo of slaves also reached the Isthmus of Panama. Although the arrival of ships with African slaves is not reported for the rest of the 1640s, in 1651 the royal officer Tomás de la Mata Linares acknowledged having seven *criollo* slaves and ten *bozal* slaves. Another royal officer, Sebastián Gómez Carrillo, declared having two *bozal* and seven *criollo* slaves.<sup>33</sup> Probably, those *bozal* slaves were transported to the isthmus while the official slave trade was still suspended.

The arrival of some 5,000 slaves in Spanish America, most of them through smuggling, during the period in which the official slave trade was suspended is documented.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, it would seem that many more captives were forced to make the transatlantic crossing.<sup>35</sup> More than an important fall-off in the existing supply of African slaves, this period witnessed a rearrangement of the transatlantic slave trade routes and its protagonists. According to A. M. Caldeira, the figures for slaves exported from Angola (the main source of slaves in Africa for the Portuguese during the seventeenth century) at the beginning and the end of the decade of the 1640s were very similar, around 15,000 and 16,000 slaves per year, with roughly a third more if we include the estimated contraband slave arrivals. Despite the Dutch campaigns in Angola, the Portuguese managed to keep the slave trade to America afloat. In contrast, the destinations of the Portuguese slave ships varied with respect to previous periods. Generally speaking, traffic to Spanish America and more specifically to the Spanish Caribbean came to play a secondary role. Tensions between the Spanish and Portuguese empires, together with increased demand for slaves from the Portuguese-Brazilian ports of Bahia, Pernambuco and Rio de Janeiro as the Dutch were expelled from the region, were determining factors in the change of routes and the shortage of African slaves in Spanish America (Caldeira 2014).

In this context of change, the Spanish-American ports that continued to receive contraband slaves were those which, irrespective of playing a peripheral role in the Carrera de Indias trade route, were more exposed to the transatlantic routes to Africa, like Buenos Aires, or those that were closer to the emerging Dutch and English colonies in the Caribbean, such as Santo Domingo (Moutoukias 1988; Caldeira 2014; Freeman 2020). Moreover, from the 1640s onwards, the Spanish American colonies in the Caribbean also had to compete with the growing demand from English settlers for African slaves to service the burgeoning sugar industry. Although European indentured servants constituted the main workforce employed in Barbados during the 1640s, there was a growing demand for African slaves, which stimulated the activities of the English slave merchants (Downes 1987).

In April 1651, the Crown and the Council of the Indies relinquished their position of prohibiting trans-imperial cooperation for the African slave trade to Spanish America. Pressure from the main Spanish American cities' representatives had influenced the re-opening of official markets and licenses to trade were again sold in Seville. The Spanish authorities prohibited the slave traders departing for Africa from engaging in business with the Portuguese rebels in the region. However, once the ships had left Spain it was almost impossible for royal officials to verify from whom and where the African slaves were bought. After 1651, the slave trade to Spanish America changed considerably compared to the period before 1640. Dutch traders operating from Curaçao became the main transatlantic slave carriers operating in the Caribbean and the leading providers of slaves to Spanish America (Klooster 1998). Thus, the trans-imperial character of the slave trade to Spanish America and its trans-national characteristics intensified as shipping patterns became more decentralized with respect to the metropole.

## **Conclusions**

The African slave trade was one of the first forms of commerce regulated by the Spanish empire at the outset of the conquest of America. Its impact on the globalization of Spanish America was paramount. Millions of African captives were taken to America as slaves in the conquest and development of colonial societies. Their central role in these processes brought about the Africanization of the colony in terms of population and culture. Their importance is evident in the case of the Isthmus of Panama: at the beginning of the seventeenth century up to eighty percent of the population of the region was of African origin. The Spanish American demand for African slaves was linked to the expansion of the colonial economy as a whole, from domestic service to the livestock trade, mining and the construction industry.



The African slave trade developed as a trans-imperial and transnational enterprise that made it very different from other types of commerce with Spanish America. The absence of Spanish trading posts in Africa placed the supply of African slaves in the hands of merchants from other empires. Consequently, the slave trade was a channel of direct contact between Spanish America and other empires that largely escaped the control of the state, despite attempts to regulate it. In comparison with other forms of trafficking, the slave trade was largely decentralized along the Spanish-American coasts. This particular feature, added to the fact that the slave trade went side by side with the exchange of other goods and products, meant that the slave ships developed an intricate network of routes linking not only the main ports of Spanish America but other secondary ports. Meanwhile, the use of African slaves by Spanish-American settlers in various kinds of production activities fueled the development of other trades and trafficking of a different nature.

The trans-imperial, transnational and decentralized character of the slave trade contrasts with the organized trade within the framework of the *Carrera de Indias*, which, was strongly directed from the homeland, highly centralized and generally intended to restrict the direct participation of foreigners. The existence of these two very different models of transatlantic trade management underscores the diversity of challenges facing the Spanish empire in organizing relations with Spanish America. At the same time, these two models of trade demonstrate the flexibility of the Spanish empire's political economy and its ability to address very different but fundamental problems for the colonization of American territories, such as the constant and growing demand for African slaves.

The characteristics of the transatlantic slave trade to Spanish America also contrast with the classic views on mercantilist policy ideals that European empires would champion in the Atlantic world. In other words, this reality belied the establishment of triangular trade among Europe, Africa and America in an imperial framework, based on the exchange of European manufactured goods, slaves and colonial products in favor of the homeland and from which the merchants of the empire benefited exclusively. However, far from representing the specific characteristics of this case as something unique, such aspects should rather be understood as constitutive elements of the political economy of the Spanish Atlantic as a whole.

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2. Biblioteca Nacional de España, mss. 3064, ff. 63r-64r.
3. Archivo General de Indias (AGI), Panamá, Leg. 87. 1-XI-1629; AGI, Panamá, Leg. 49, n. 30. 1-XII-1633.
4. AGI, Panamá, Leg. 50, n. 3. 30-IV-1649; Leg. 57, n. 56. 18-III-1650.
5. Biblioteca Nacional de España (BNE), Mss. 3064, f. 126r.
6. Biblioteca de la Real Academia de la Historia (BRAH), Colección Muñoz, various mss. 66, ff. 275r-286v.
7. AGI, Indiferente General (IG), Leg. 427, Lib. 30, ff. 175v-176r. 12-VIII-1566.
8. [www.slavevoyages.org/voyages/FzOj2HX8](http://www.slavevoyages.org/voyages/FzOj2HX8)
9. AGI, Panamá, Leg. 15, r. 8, n. 79. 25-VI-1607.
10. BNE, mss 3064, f. 63r.
11. AGI, Panamá, Leg. 15, r. 8, n. 79. 25-VI-1607.
12. AGI, IG, Leg. 429, Lib.38, f. 181v. 1-I-1641.
13. AGI, Panamá, Leg. 229, Lib. 3, ff. 225v-226r. 15-V-1645; ff. 290v-291r. 7-VIII-1646.
14. AGI, Panamá, Leg. 229, Lib. 3, ff. 335r-335v. 5-VIII-1647.
15. AGI, Escribanía, Leg. 484-A, pieza 1, ff. 152r-172v.
16. AGI, Panamá, Leg. 229, Lib. 3, f. 306v. 14-II-1647.
17. AGI, IG, Leg. 2796. 1645.
18. AGI, IG, Leg. 2796. 1-IV-1647.
19. AGI, IG, Leg. 2796. 4-IV-1647.
20. AGI, IG, Leg. 2796. 5-II-1645; 1-XI-1647.
21. AGI, IG, Leg. 2796, 24-IV-1648; AGI, México, Leg. 36, n. 57. 11-VII-1651.
22. AGI, IG, Leg. 2796. 13-XII-1646, 21-III-1647; 11-V-1647; 20-II-1648; 14-X-1648.
23. AGI, IG, Leg. 2796. 30-VIII-1645; 19-X-1645.
24. AGI, IG, Leg. 2796. 30-VIII-1645.
25. AGI, IG, Leg. 2796. 12-V-1646.
26. AGI, IG, Leg. 2796. 12-V-1646; 5-VII-1647.
27. AGI, Panamá, Leg. 49, n. 87. 12-IX-1645.
28. AGI, Panamá, Leg. 31, n. 46.
29. AGI, Panamá, Leg. 49, n. 87. 12-IX-1645; AGI, Panamá, Leg. 31, n. 46; AGI, IG, Leg. 2796. 1-VII-1647.
30. AGI, Panamá, Leg. 31, n. 44. 12-IX-1645.
31. AGI, Panamá, Leg. 49, n. 87. 12-IX-1645.
32. AGI, Panamá, Leg. 35, n. 52.
33. AGI, Escribanía, Leg. 484-A, pieza 3, ff. 12v-17r, 19v-22v.
34. [www.slavevoyages.org/voyages/qb5pOnLh](http://www.slavevoyages.org/voyages/qb5pOnLh)
35. [www.slavevoyages.org/voyages/qb5pOnLh](http://www.slavevoyages.org/voyages/qb5pOnLh)

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