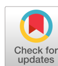

International Review of Social History (2024), pp. 1–25
doi:10.1017/S0020859024000567

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Navigating Labour Shifts: Early Modern Pearl Fishing in the Caribbean (1521–1563)*

Fidel Rodríguez Velásquez

Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
E-mail: fidelrodv@gmail.com

Abstract

Narratives about indigenous labour in the pearl fisheries of the Caribbean, widely disseminated across the Atlantic world since the sixteenth century by Castilian chroniclers, have significantly shaped historiography. These accounts have reinforced a singular narrative about labour within pearl fisheries that overlooks this work's spatial and temporal changes in sea depths. This article examines and reconstructs the labour practices of workers in the pearl fisheries on the islands of Cubagua, Margarita, and Coche, as well as the coast of Cabo de la Vela and Riohacha, highlighting their temporal and spatial transformations. Additionally, it analyses the coexistence of various forms of coerced labour within this context.

Introduction

From the outset of the global expansion of the Iberian empires, pearls have been a central commodity.[1] This marine jewel, a symbol of distinction for royalty, topped the list of goods included in the Capitulations of Santa Fe in 1492. Following the signing of this document, the monarchs of Castile financed the expeditions of Christopher Columbus with the expectation of receiving "pearls, precious stones, gold, silver, [and] spices".[2] When Columbus's project faced significant challenges

*Special thanks are owed to Julimar Mora Silva and the team at the Laboratório de Pesquisas em Conexões Atlânticas (CNPq/PUC-Rio), particularly Crislayne Alfagali, Diego Galeano, Leonardo Pereira, Larissa Corrêa, and Felipe Azevedo, for their invaluable feedback. Additionally, sincere gratitude is extended to Aad Blok, Executive Editor at the *International Review of Social History*, the journal's Editorial Committee, and the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful contributions.

[1]On the globalization of Iberian empires and commodities, see Bethany Aram and Bartolomé Yun-Casalilla (eds), *Global Goods and the Spanish Empire, 1492–1824: Circulation, Resistance and Diversity* (New York, 2014); Bartolomé Yun-Casalilla, *Iberian World Empires and the Globalization of Europe 1415–1668* (Cham, 2019); Fernando Bouza, Pedro Cardim, and Antonio Feros (eds), *The Iberian World: 1450–1820* (Abingdon-on-Thames, 2019); Sven Beckert, Ulbe Bosma, Mindi Schneider, and Eric Vanhaute, "Commodity Frontiers and the Transformation of the Global Countryside: A Research Agenda", *Journal of Global History*, 16:3 (2021), pp. 435–450. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022820000455; last accessed 3 January 2024.

[2]Capitulaciones de Santa de Fe (17 April 1492), Archivo General de Indias [hereafter, AGI], Seville, Spain, Indiferente, 418, Libro 1, fo. 1r. Unless stated otherwise, all translations are my own.

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis

due to a lack of economic returns, his encounter with the pearl fisheries in the south-east Caribbean in 1498 revitalized the American enterprise. This new-found momentum led to new contracts and expeditions to the region in 1499, which confirmed the abundance of pearls, broke with the monopoly of oriental pearls, and enriched the merchants involved.[3]

The news of the pearls inspired numerous chronicles,[4] theological-legal debates,[5] maps,[6] and prints[7] in subsequent years, shaping early perceptions of the "New World", the Hispanic monarchy, and its relationship with the labour exploitation of indigenous populations.[8] One of the most influential texts was the *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* by the Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas, which resonated throughout sixteenth-century Europe. Las Casas declared, "The tyranny that the Spaniards exercised against the Indians in the extraction or fishing of pearls is one of the most cruel and condemned things that can exist in the world." His words condemned the labour conditions in the depths of the sea, concluding that: "There is no infernal and desperate life in this century that can be compared to it."[9] Las Casas's narrative not only had a significant impact at the time, but it has also influenced how the history of pearl fisheries is studied and understood.

Recent scholarly works have focused exclusively on indigenous labour.[10] At the same time, these studies have created a binary opposition between an Iberian elite,

[3]Fidel Rodríguez Velásquez, "La formación de fronteras en los confines del mundo atlántico. Nueva Cádiz de Cubagua y las costas de las perlas durante la modernidad temprana (1498–1550)", *Boletin de la Academia Nacional de la Historia (Venezuela)*, 408 (2019), pp. 105–126.

[4]See the modern editions of the following sixteenth-century chronicles: Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, *Sumario de la historia natural de las Indias* (Madrid, 2010), ch. 84, pp. 345–348; *idem*, *Historia general y natural de las Indias, 1535*, vol. 1 (Madrid, 1851); Pedro Mártir de Anglería, *Décadas del nuevo mundo, 1504* (Madrid, 1989), chs 7, 9, and 10 on "Decade 1" and chs 2, 5, and 10 on "Decade 2"; Francisco López de Gómara, *Historia general de las Indias y vida de Hernán Cortes, 1552* (Caracas, 1979), chs 74–77; Juan de Castellanos, *Elegías de varones ilustres de Indias, 1589* (Madrid, 1857), elegy 13; Josef de Acosta, *Historia natural y moral de las Indias, 1590* (Madrid, 2008), bk 4, ch. 15.

[5]See e.g. Bartolomé de las Casas, *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias, 1552*, edited by Trinidad Barrera (Madrid, 2005), see "De la costa de las perlas y de Paria y la isla de Trinidad", pp. 146–155.

[6]See e.g. Carta de Juan de la Cosa (1500), Archivo del Museo Naval, Madrid, Spain, Signature, MNM 257; also Carta da navigar per le Isole nouam tr[ovate] in le parte de l'India. Dono Alberto Cantino al S. Duca Hercole (1502), Archivo de la Biblioteca de la Universidad Estense de Modena, Italy, Signature, C.G.A.2.

[7]See e.g. Samuel de Champlain, *Voyages of Samuel de Champlain*, vol. 11 (Boston, MA, 1878).

[8]Fidel Rodríguez Velásquez and Oliver Antczak, "Nueva Cádiz de Cubagua and the Pearl Fisheries of the Caribbean", in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History* (2023). Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199366439.013.1186; last accessed 3 June 2024.

[9]Las Casas, *Brevísima relación*, p. 141.

[10]See María Eugenio, "Los últimos esclavos indígenas en la pesquería de perlas del río de La Hacha. La provisión de Felipe II para su liberación (1567)", *Coloquios de Historia Canario-Americana*, 13 (1998), pp. 948–963; Aldemaro Romero, Susanna Chilbert, and M.G. Eisenhart, "Cubagua's Pearl-Oyster Beds: The First Depletion of a Natural Resource Caused by Europeans in the American Continent", *Journal of Political Ecology*, 6 (1999), pp. 57–78; Aldemaro Romero, "Death and Taxes: The Case of the Depletion of Pearl Oyster Beds in Sixteenth-Century Venezuela", *Conservation Biology*, 17:4 (2003), pp. 1013–1023. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1523-1739.2003.01406.x; last accessed 2 January 2024; Eduardo Barrera Monroy, "Los esclavos de las perlas. Voces y rostros indígenas en la Granjería de Perlas del Cabo de la Vela (1540–1570)", *Boletín Cultural y Bibliográfico*, 39:61 (2002), pp. 2–33; Michael Perri, "'Ruined and Lost': Spanish Destruction of the Pearl Coast in the Early Sixteenth Century", *Environment and*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859024000567 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the "Señores de Canoas" (Canoe Lords), and the enslaved divers. This historiography has also generally accepted and reproduced a singular narrative of labour relations in pearl fishing. Simultaneously, influential modern historians like John Elliott have contributed to diverting attention from the initial periods of Iberian presence in the Caribbean and from a detailed examination of labour relations in pearl fishing. Elliott argues that it was only legitimate to speak of the Atlantic world during the second half of the sixteenth century and describes pearls as a product that "required minimal processing or development".[11]

This article challenges these binary oppositions and singular narrative of labour relationships in the pearl fisheries. It explores the transformations of labour experiences, examining the evolution of workforce needs, the variety of labour relations, and the methods of control and regulation implemented by the Canoe Lords. These changes are considered in the context of the initial phase of oyster bank exploitation between 1521 and 1563, which was marked by experimentation, regional resistance, and political control by indigenous populations.[12] By investigating these dynamics, this article broadens the debates in the field of global labour history,[13] particularly during the formative period of the Hispanic monarchy, where power and violence were not monopolized solely by its officials and entrepreneurs.

The Pearl Fisheries, Indigenous Populations, and the Canoe Lords

The pearls from the southern Caribbean, like other products, played a foundational role in the construction of global trade networks from the earliest commercial

History, 15:2 (2009), pp. 129–161. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3197/096734009X437963; last accessed 2 January 2024; Molly Warsh, "Enslaved Pearl Divers in the Sixteenth Century Caribbean", *Slavery & Abolition*, 31:3 (2010), pp. 345–362. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2010.504540; last accessed 1 January 2024.

[11]John H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America 1492–1830* (London, 2006), p. 91.

[12]Pierre Chaunu, "Chapitre XI. Les 'îles' de terre ferme. Caractères généraux. L'Est", in *Séville et l'Atlantique, 1504–1650. Structures et conjoncture de l'Atlantique espagnol et hispano-américain (1504–1650)*, vol. 1: *Structures géographiques*, Travaux et mémoires (Paris, 2019). See pp. 587–624 where Chaunu refers to "a zone of maximum resistance of indigenous populations". See also Molly Warsh, *American Baroque: Pearls and the Nature of Empire, 1492–1700* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2018). Warsh states on p. 38: "As the settlements along the Pearl Coast grew, relative local indigenous power meant that European sojourners had to look elsewhere for their workforce."

[13]These debates unfold in sources such as the following: "Free and Unfree Labour", *International Review of Social History*, 35:1 (1990), pp. 1–2; Silvia Hunold Lara, "Blowin in the Wind. EP Thompson e a experiência negra no Brasil", *Projeto História. Revista do Programa de Estudos Pós-Graduados de História*, 12 (1995), pp. 43–56; Tom Brass and Marcel van der Linden (eds), *Free and Unfree Labour: The Debate Continues* (Bern, 1997); Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays towards a Global Labor History* (Amsterdam [etc.], 2008); *idem*, "História do trabalho. O velho, o novo e o global", *Revista Mundos do trabalho*, 1 (2009), pp. 11–26; Kevin Dawson, "History Below the Waterline: Enslaved Salvage Divers Harvesting Seaports' Hinter-Seas in the Early Modern Atlantic", *International Review of Social History*, 64:SI27 (2019), pp. 43–70; Christian G. de Vito, Juliane Schiel, and Matthias van Rossum, "From Bondage to Precariousness? New Perspectives on Labor and Social History", *Journal of Social History*, 54:2 (2020), pp. 644–662; David P. Lacerda, Matheus Serva Pereira, and Nauber Gavski da Silva, "Introdução. História social, capitalismo global e mundos do trabalho: entrelaçamentos e convergências historiográficas", in David P. Lacerda, Matheus Serva Pereira, and Nauber Gavski da Silva (eds), *Liberdades fraturadas. Diálogos cruzados em história social* (Santo André, 2022).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859024000567 Published online by Cambridge University Press

transactions between indigenous peoples and Iberians in the late fifteenth century.[14] These marine jewels were extracted from the sea adjacent to the islands of Cubagua, Margarita, and Coche, as well as from the coast of Tierra Firme around Cabo de la Vela and Riohacha (Figure 1). The most important city dedicated to the exploitation of oyster banks was Nueva Cádiz, founded in 1528 on the island of Cubagua, known since the end of the fifteenth century as the "Island of Pearls" (see Figure 2).[15] The wealth generated from pearl exploitation led to the emergence of an elite group involved in pearl fishing, known as the Canoe Lords, whose influence grew alongside the profits from the pearl business.[16]

Prominent figures within this elite included men like Juan de la Barrera and Diego Caballero, who were among the foremost transatlantic merchants under Charles V's rule (1516–1556).[17] Juan de la Barrera was a leading merchant of Cubagua and a member of a business family with branches involved in the West African slave trade.[18] Along with other merchants like Rodrigo de Gibraleón, they established the most significant transatlantic network for exporting Caribbean pearls and importing Sevillian products such as wine, oil, and wheat to the Caribbean.

Caballero held positions such as accountant for the island of Hispaniola and obtained the title of marshal. In addition to being a Canoe Lord of Cubagua, his business interests spanned Cape Verde, Santo Domingo, Cabo de la Vela, Honduras, Popayán, New Spain (Mexico), Panama, Nombre de Dios, Peru, and Flanders.[19] While La Barrera was the most important pearl merchant, Caballero, considering the breadth of his business ventures, was one the most significant merchants during the reign of Charles V.

Also notable within this pearl elite were members of the Urrutia family, such as Sancho Urrutia and Juan de Urrutia, who were among the first Basque merchants to engage in Atlantic trade. They, along with their fellow Basques, built one of the most influential networks within the emerging apparatus of the Hispanic monarchy.[20] One characteristic of these early generations of Canoe Lords was their proximity to the government apparatus of the Hispanic monarchy. They often held roles as both officials and merchants simultaneously.

Around 1521, the first oyster extraction settlements emerged on the island of Cubagua. This year was characterized by a significant geopolitical readjustment in the region. Indigenous populations reaffirmed their control over neighbouring islands and the surrounding mainland, while the Iberians solidified their hold on Cubagua. The events leading to this shift included the expulsion of Iberians from

[14]Warsh, *American Baroque*.

[15]Enrique Otte, *Las perlas del Caribe. Nueva Cádiz de Cubagua* (Caracas, 1977).

[16]Rodríguez Velásquez and Antczak, "Nueva Cádiz de Cubagua".

[17]Enrique Otte, "Los Mercaderes transatlánticos bajo Carlos V", *Anuario de Estudios Americanos*, 47 (1990), pp. 95–121.

[18]María Ángeles Eugenio, "Una empresa de perlas. Los Barrera en el Caribe", in *XI Jornadas de Andalucía y América* (1992), pp. 9–37.

[19]Enrique Otte, "Diego Caballero, funcionario de la Casa de Contratación", in Antonio Acosta Rodríguez and Adolfo González Rodríguez (eds), *La Casa de la contratación y la navegación entre España y las Indias* (Seville, 2004), pp. 315–339.

[20]Enrique Otte, "Los Mercaderes Vizcainos Sancho Ortiz de Urrutia y Juan de Urrutia", *Boletin Histórico*, 6 (1964), pp. 5–32.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859024000567 Published online by Cambridge University Press

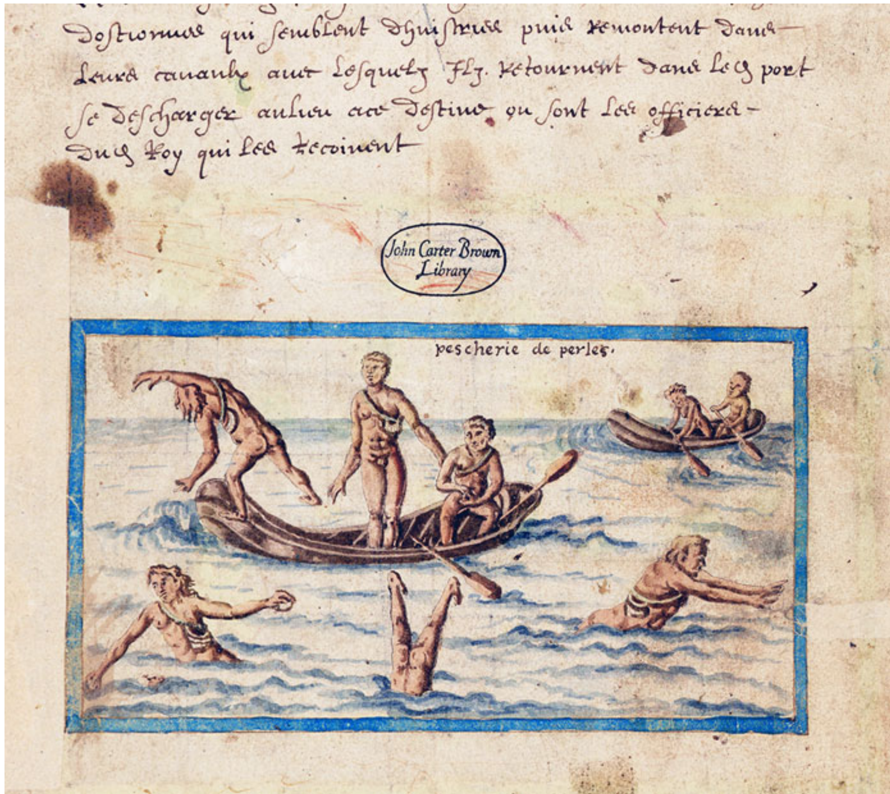

Figure 1. "Pescherie de perles", one of the illustrations in Samuel de Champlain's *Brief discours des choses plus remarquables que Samuel Champlain de Brouage á reconneues aux Indes occidentales*. [1602?]. *Source: John Carter Brown Library, Codex Fr 1, 04684.*

all mainland settlements and Cubagua in 1520. This expulsion was orchestrated by the Maragüey, the indigenous leader of the province of Maracapana, who led a coalition comprising "Indians of Cumaná and those of Cariaco, and […] Chiribichi and Maracapana [and] Tacarias and Neveri and Unari"[21] to destroy the recently established Iberian constructions on the coast. Among the destroyed sites were the monasteries of Santa Fe and San Francisco de Cumaná, which were burned and looted.

News of these events reached Cubagua through a few survivors, including a Christian indigenous person and a Castilian friar who arrived by canoe from Maracapana and a Spanish captain who fled after witnessing the death of his crew in Guanta.[22] Their reports instilled fear among the population of Cubagua, prompting them to abandon the island and flee to Santo Domingo. When the

[21]Fernández de Oviedo, *Sumario de la historia natural*, vol. 1, p. 595.

[22]Rodrigo de Figueroa, "A Sus Majestades. Los oidores é oficiales Reales. De Santo Domingo á 14 de Noviembre de 1520", in *Colección de documentos inéditos relativos al descubrimiento, conquista y organización de las antiguas posesiones españolas en América y Oceanía, sacados de los Archivos del Reino, y muy especialmente del de Indias*, vol. 1 (Madrid, 1520), pp. 422–427, 423.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859024000567 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 2. The southeastern Caribbean regions of pearl exploitation.

indigenous canoes arrived at Cubagua, they found a ghost town with "many barrels of wine and many provisions to eat, and ransoms and furniture",[23] which were taken as spoils of war.

[23]Fernández de Oviedo, *Historia general y natural*, p. 596.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859024000567 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In response to the expulsion, the Iberians organized a punitive expedition from Hispaniola, led by Captain Gonzalo de Ocampo. His fleet, composed of seven vessels, including four caravels, aimed to "punish" the indigenous people responsible for their expulsion.[24] Almost simultaneously, Bartolomé de las Casas prepared another attempt to occupy the territory following negotiations with the monarchy. Despite an expedition lasting more than ten months, De Ocampo returned to Hispaniola without establishing effective control over the region. Meanwhile, Las Casas, who had promised the crown four generations of heirs, 10,000 evangelized indigenous peoples, and 15,000 ducats of fixed income during the first four years, was also expelled by the indigenous peoples of the Paria coast who "rose [up] after the licentiate Las Casas went to those parts".[25]

The most significant outcome of these expeditions was the recovery of the Iberian settlement on Cubagua by De Ocampo and the establishment of a small wooden fortress called Nueva Toledo near the Cumaná River on the mainland. This development in 1521 marked a transformation in labour practices. Prior to this year, nearly all pearl production and extraction were managed by indigenous populations. The new settlements, however, differed from the earlier ones as they operated primarily as trading posts where indigenous peoples from neighbouring regions brought pearls to exchange for Iberian products. In contrast, the new settlements were dedicated to the direct exploitation of the oyster banks.

The Work and the Workers

The limitations imposed by nearby indigenous populations on Cubagua resulted in the first indigenous divers arriving primarily from Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Lucayan Islands – areas where Iberian control in the Caribbean was more effective. The circulation and transfer of indigenous peoples for labour exploitation purposes began in the early decades of the sixteenth century.[26] As early as 1505, King Ferdinand of Aragon (r. 1479–1516) authorized the residents of Hispaniola to enslave "cannibal Indians" from the islands of San Bernardo and Fuerte, the ports of Cartagena, and the islands of Vany. This permission was repeated in 1509 in favour of Diego de Nicuesa and Alonso de Ojeda, two Spanish conquistadors interested in colonizing Tierra Firme. This practice intensified in 1514 with the implementation of the Armada system, authorized by the Royal Audiencia of Santo Domingo.[27] Between 1520 and 1527, at least forty-five barter ships were identified as authorized participants in the enslavement of indigenous peoples, facilitating their subsequent circulation as workers throughout the Caribbean.

[24]Enrique Otte, "La expedición de Gonzalo de Ocampo a Cumaná en 1521, en las cuentas de Tesorería de Santo Domingo", *Revista de Indias*, 16 (1956), pp. 63–93.

[25]"Relación hecha por Miguel de Castellanos sobre el viaje que hizo a la costa de Paria con fray Bartolomé de las Casas" (1524), AGI, Patronato, 252, ramo 4.

[26]Roberto Valcárcel Rojas *et al*, "Slavery of Indigenous People in the Caribbean: An Archaeological Perspective", *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, 24 (2020), pp. 517–545. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10761-019-00522-x; last accessed 15 December 2023.

[27]Karen F. Anderson-Córdova, *Surviving Spanish Conquest: Indian Fight, Flight, and Cultural Transformation in Hispaniola and Puerto Rico* (Tuscaloosa, 2017), pp. 174–175.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859024000567 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The daily routine of these workers began at dawn when indigenous divers sailed in canoes from their settlements to the oyster banks. Some oyster banks were located around Cubagua, while others were near neighbouring islands such as Coche and Margarita, and along the mainland coast. Generally, the distance between the oyster banks and the settlements was between one and two leagues (approximately 7.2 km to 9.7 km).[28]

Two methods were employed at the documented pearl extraction sites worldwide: direct diving and mechanized fishing using the dragging technique.[29] However, the Canoe Lords largely rejected the dragging technique,[30] which was practised only in an almost anecdotal manner.[31] Consequently, direct diving was the primary method used in the Caribbean oyster banks during the first half of the sixteenth century.

Divers typically plunged into the sea nearly naked, using a stone to aid their descent. They carried tools such as the gouge, made from the shell of the queen conch (*Aligator gigas*), to pry oysters from the seabed, and a basket or net to store their harvest. Some divers used a bone clamp on their noses, while others pinched their noses shut with their fingers to prevent water from entering; experienced divers did not need nose implements. Occasionally, divers also carried a weapon to protect themselves from attacks by marine predators.

Direct diving for pearls was performed at various depths, and oyster banks can be categorized into four groups: (1) shallow banks located between 4 and 5 fathoms (6 to 8 metres deep); (2) moderate-depth banks located between 8 and 9 fathoms (13 to 15 metres deep); (3) deep banks located between 10 and 12 fathoms (16 to 20 metres deep); and (4) very deep banks located at depths greater than 12 fathoms (over 20 metres deep).[32] Historical documentation also identifies banks in the second group as being at the maximum depth suitable for oyster diving without divers suffering severe health consequences. Banks in groups three and four required exceptional divers due to the complexity and risks associated with their depths.[33]

Divers could use ropes to assist their movements in these depths, surfacing to rest, eat, and empty their nets into designated areas within their canoes before diving again.[34] This continuous process lasted until sunset when divers returned to their settlements. The depth and complexity of the oyster banks correlated with the size

[28]"Luis Lampiñán, vecino de la ciudad de Sevilla, con la Justicia y vecinos de la Nueva Ciudad de Cádiz, en la isla de Cubagua sobre la forma en que aquel debía hacer la pesquería de perlas" (15 October 1529 to 28 June 1530), AGI, Justicia, 7, no. 4.

[29]Ligia Paulina Maya Puerta, "Configuración arqueológica de las 'Rancherías de Perlas' en la Península de la Guajira durante la primera mitad del siglo XVI. Un acercamiento Teórico" (Master's thesis, Universidad de Cádiz, 2019).

[30]Enrique Otte, "El proceso del rastro de perlas de Luis de Lampiñan", *Boletín de la Academia Nacional de la Historia*, 187 (1964), pp. 386–406; Molly Warsh, "A Political Ecology in the Early Spanish Caribbean", *William & Mary Quarterly*, 71:4 (2014), pp. 517–548.

[31]See Molly Warsh, *American Baroque*, ch. 4.

[32]"Luis Lampiñán, vecino de la ciudad de Sevilla".

[33]*Ibid.*

[34]Enrique Orche García, "Exploitation of Pearl Fisheries in the Spanish American Colonies", *De re metallica (Madrid). Revista de la Sociedad Española para la Defensa del Patrimonio Geológico y Minero*, 13 (2009), pp. 19–33, 26.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859024000567 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and value of the pearls, establishing a key relationship: the greater the depth, the more challenging the dive, but also the larger and thus more valuable the pearls.

The depth at which divers operated directly impacted their work rhythms and the benefits they received. Those documented as "good Indians",[35] due to their superior swimming and diving skills, reached the greatest depths where the best pearls were found. These skilled divers received certain benefits related to food and, especially, rest days. While indigenous workers at shallower banks (groups one and two) only rested on Sundays, the "good Indians" working at deeper levels enjoyed rest intervals of three to four days a week,[36] albeit with a higher risk of mortality.

A detailed analysis of available data allows us to estimate some numbers regarding work at sea. The year 1527 marked the highest level of oyster bank exploitation in the city of Nueva Cádiz, with pearl production reaching 1,170 marks, equivalent to around 1,649 kilograms or 82,455 carats of pearls.[37] This volume would mean harvesting at least 16,491,000 oysters. According to Aldemaro Romero's calculations, each indigenous diver would have collected an average of 32,982 oysters in 1527, equating to about 105 pearls per day.[38] However, the numbers varied yearly, especially as the oyster banks began to decline.

The pearl fisheries on Cubagua had a distinct spatial division. The colonial city of Nueva Cádiz was the centre of the pearl trade and political life of the Canoe Lords and a social hub for European inhabitants. However, the actual work of pearl extraction took place in the settlements where the workers lived. In these settlements, oysters extracted from the sea were processed and opened in the presence of a European overseer.

Women played a crucial role in these settlements, preparing food and participating in shucking the oysters and extracting the pearls. These roles illustrate the imposition of a gender division of labour: men were exclusively employed as divers, while women, described as navigators and canoeists during the early voyages, were confined to land-based work.[39]

By 1528, precise areas of pearl extraction were established, with settlements built by the Iberians near these areas. Some of these locations can be identified through historical maps, judicial records, and archaeological data. Important sites on Margarita identified in the documentary sources include Guaymacanao, Punta de Piedras, Punta de Mangle, Banda Norte, and Morro de Charayma. Key sites on the mainland included Punta Arena, the Araya Peninsula, and Cumaná, while on Cubagua and Coche, pearl fisheries operated around the entire islands.[40]

André Thevet (1516–1590), a French Franciscan friar, identified the locations of oyster beds on Cubagua and depicted them on a map, marking areas where pearl

[35]"Luis Lampiñán, vecino de la ciudad de Sevilla".

[36]*Ibid.*

[37]Otte, *Las perlas del Caribe*, p. 315. See also Rodríguez Velásquez and Antczak, "Nueva Cádiz de Cubagua", p. 8.

[38]Romero, "Death and Taxes", p. 1019.

[39]See Fidel Rodríguez Velásquez, "Navegantes indígenas, perlas y canoas en el Caribe del siglo XVI. Experiencias transculturales conectadas por el mar", *Trabajos y Comunicaciones*, 55 (2022), pp. e161–e182. Available at: https://doi.org/10.24215/23468971e161; last accessed 10 December 2023.

[40]"Luis Lampiñán, vecino de la ciudad de Sevilla".

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859024000567 Published online by Cambridge University Press

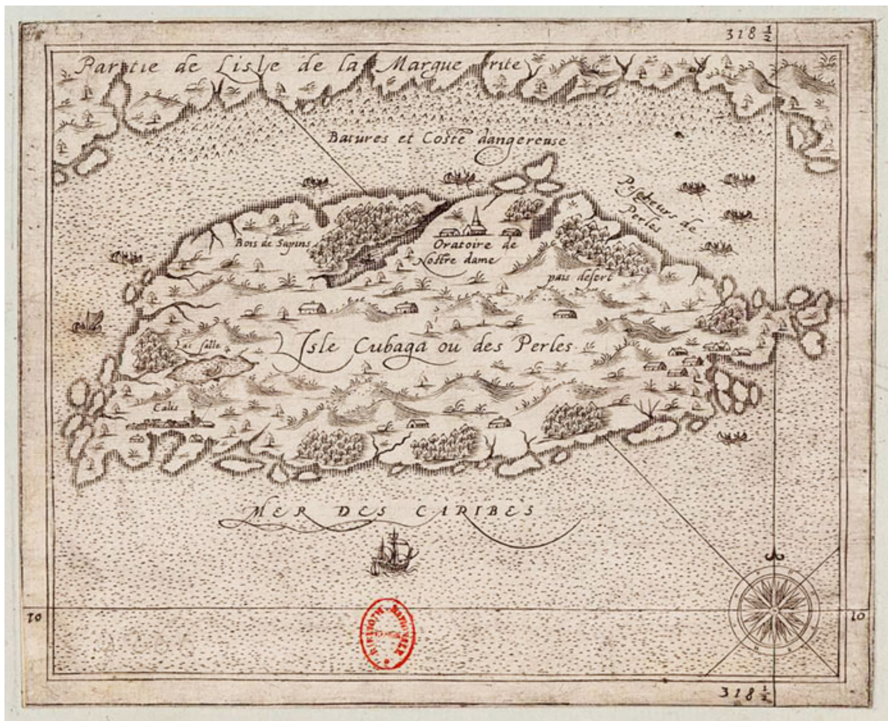

Figure 3. Map depicting oyster banks on Cubagua, in André Thevet's *L'Isle Cubaga ou des Perles*, 1586.
Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, France.

fishing took place with canoes and *rancherías* (see Figure 3). Additionally, archaeological remains have allowed the identification of thirty-six settlements on Cubagua and another four on Margarita and Coche.[41] The spatial location of these settlements was directly associated with the location of the oyster banks.

The spatial proximity between the settlements and the oyster banks was regulated by the Spanish crown, which even legislated on the matter. The compilation of the Laws of the Indies mandated that priests be sent to administer sacraments to pearl settlements far from cities. These settlements were required to have a good harbour, ample supply of water and firewood, and flexibility to adapt to the typical changes associated with such constructions.[42] Each *ranchería*, generally built as a type of

[41]Aníbal Carballo, "Cambios de los Paisajes Ancestrales de la isla de Cubagua (4000 A.C. – 1955 D.C.), Arqueología y etnohistoria" (Master's thesis, Instituto Venezolano de Investigaciones Científicas, 2015); Andrzej T. Antczak *et al.*, "Rancherías: Historical Archaeology of Early Colonial Campsites on Margarita and Coche", in Corinne L. Hofman and Floris W.M. Keehnen (eds), *Material Encounters and Indigenous Transformations in the Early Colonial Americas* (Leiden, 2019), pp. 146–174. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004273689; last accessed 10 December 2023.

[42]Francisco Domínguez Compañy, "Municipal Organization of the Rancherías of Pearls", *The Americas*, 21:1 (1964), pp. 58–68.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859024000567 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 1. Number of indigenous workers per *Ranchería* on Cubagua

Canoe Lord	Workers		
	Male	Female	Total
Diego Caballero	35	5	40
Pedro Ortiz de Matienzo	23	4	27
Francisco de Portillo	18	7	25
Martín Alonso Alemán	18	4	22
Pedro de Barrio Nuevo	12	4	16
Antón de Jaén	9	6	15
Pedro de Herrera	11	4	15
Jacome de Castellón	8	0	8
Juan Juárez de Figueroa	6	2	8
Juan López de Archuleta	4	4	8
Miguel de Gaviria	5	1	6
Andrés de Villacorta	4	0	4
Gonzalo Hernández	3	1	4

Source: Compiled by the author from data in AGI, Justicia, 8, no. 1, fo. 68; AGI, Justicia, 351, no. 1, fo. 2r; AGI, Justicia, 53, fo. 249; AGI, Justicia, 647.

itinerant dwelling, had a similar internal configuration, although significant variations existed in the number of workers.

The Canoe Lords' inventories provide detailed information about some of the workers living in these settlements. Data from these inventories show that the largest settlements on Cubagua belonged to Diego Caballero, Pedro Ortiz de Matienzo, and Martín Alonso Alemán, respectively. These settlements housed up to thirty-five men and five women (in the case of Caballero) (see Table 1). The inventories record a total of 198 indigenous workers living in these settlements. However, inventories for the aforementioned Juan de la Barrera, one of the most important Canoe Lords, have not been preserved.

The inventories also provide a map of the regions of origin of indigenous divers, based on the ethnonyms associated with indigenous workers. For example, the assets of Martín Alonso Alemán included three enslaved divers identified by the toponym "Lucayos".[43] These individuals worked at the *ranchería* located on the island of Coche.[44] The toponym "Lucayo" refers to the group of islands north of Hispaniola, whose inhabitants were among the first groups enslaved by the Iberians,

[43]"Proceso Criminal contra Pedro de Barrionuevo por el asesinato de Martín Alonso Alemán" (15 December 1528), AGI, Justicia, 53, fos 253r–255v.

[44]Juan "Lucayo" also appears among the enslaved divers of Pedro Ortiz de Matienzo. See "Proceso Criminal contra Pedro Ortiz de Matienzo de sus primeros cargos" (11 October 1533), AGI, Justicia, 53, fo. 559r.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859024000567 Published online by Cambridge University Press

initially for work in the mines of Hispaniola and later for the pearl fisheries.[45] They were auctioned for between 100 and 150 Spanish castellanos due to their high value, compared to the 8 pesos paid for indigenous peoples on Hispaniola and the 20 pesos for each mark of pearl.[46] The high value of Lucayan divers was attributed to their tall stature, commonly "taller than the Germans",[47] and their exceptional abilities for diving and working at sea. Lucayan divers on Cubagua were among the approximately 800 indigenous people from this archipelago who survived into the third decade of the sixteenth century after nearly 40,000 had been enslaved for work in the mines of Hispaniola in previous decades.[48]

The toponym "Yucatán" identifies eight indigenous individuals, including a woman named Isabella, who were in the service of Alcade mayor Pedro de Herrera.[49] The other seven, whose names are unknown, belonged to the *ranchería* of Antón de Jaén and worked in pearl diving.[50] This toponym suggests these enslaved individuals originated from the Gulf of Mexico, specifically a coastal region named Yucatán. The first Iberian expeditions to that region occurred between 1517 and 1519, led by Francisco Hernández de Córdoba, Juan de Grijalva, and Hernán Cortés. However, early attempts to dominate the region failed due to the formidable Maya fortifications along the coast. These failures forced the explorers to occupy the island of Cozumel, where they obtained the first enslaved individuals from the region and seized "diadems, idols, beads, and gold pendants" by force.[51] The individuals identified with the name Yucatán may actually be Maya people engaged in fishing on this Gulf of Mexico island.

Two other toponyms found in judicial inventories related to this region are "Santo Domingo" and "San German". Santo Domingo is associated with an indigenous person named Luis, aged fifty, who belonged to Diego Caballero, while San German is associated with Juan, who belonged to Pedro Ortiz de Matienzo.[52] Both toponyms correspond to cities in the Greater Antilles, indicating a direct relationship of origin rather than an ethnic or identity marker.

Another name associated with indigenous peoples in the pearl fisheries is *naboría*, which appears in inventories linked to seven indigenous individuals, all men. Six belonged to Pedro de Herrera's *ranchería* and one to Pedro de Barrio Nuevo's.[53]

[45]Julian Granberry, "Spanish Slave Trade in the Bahamas, 1509–1520: An Aspect of the Caribbean Pearl Industry", *Journal of the Bahamas Historical Society*, 1 (1979), pp. 14–15.

[46]Many variables affect the price of pearls; the price indicated corresponds to some transactions carried out on Hispaniola. See "Cuentas dadas por el tesorero Miguel de Pasamonte y tomadas por el licenciado Alonso López de Cerrato, juez de residencia" (1520–1525), AGI, Contaduría, 1050, no. 1.

[47]Fernández de Oviedo, *Sumario de la historial natural*, p. 75.

[48]Anderson-Córdova, *Surviving Spanish Conquest*, p. 136.

[49]"Proceso criminal contra Pedro Herrera por los cargos segundos" (8 May 1533), AGI, Justicia, 53, fos 417r–420v.

[50]*Ibid.*

[51]Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España, 1568* (México, 1977), p. 90.

[52]"Proceso criminal contra Pedro Ortiz de Matienzo de sus primeros cargos" (11 October 1533), AGI, Justicia, 351, no. 1, ramo 2; "Registro de Francisco Caballero" (11 October 1533), AGI, Justicia, 53, fo. 559.

[53]"Proceso criminal contra Pedro de Barrionuevo por el asesinato de Martín Alonso Alemán" (8 May 1533), AGI, Justicia, 53, fos 417r–420v; "Contra Pedro Herrera por los cargos segundos" (14 December 1528), AGI, Justicia, 53, fo. 249.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859024000567 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Unlike the other terms mentioned so far, *naboría* is neither a toponym nor an ethnonym. It is a Taíno word referring to a specific sector of Taíno society in the Greater Antilles. Taíno society was structured into large chiefdoms that governed multiple villages or districts, from which they collected tribute.[54] Below the powerful rulers were the *behiques*, who performed rituals and acted as healers and soothsayers. The rest of the population was broadly grouped into two social categories: the *nitaínos* (nobles) and the *naborías* (commoners), who paid tributes.[55]

In practice, the Iberians used the term *naboría* to refer to workers who legally could not be enslaved and were supposed to receive wages for their work. Initially, these workers came from the island of Hispaniola, but the term was later applied to indigenous peoples from other Caribbean regions. Although recent reconstructions of labour forms[56] have overlooked this term, it is comparable to the concept of free workers in Andean societies. However, despite the legal distinction from the enslaved divers (legislation prevented classified *naborías* from directly working in pearl diving), in practice, the social conditions of these indigenous workers were similar, with the primary difference being that the Canoe Lords could not legally sell them. This reality was not unique to pearl fisheries but was common in mining operations on Hispaniola and in Central America.[57]

Can we talk about the coexistence of various forms of labour coercion in the pearl fisheries?[58] To address this question, it is necessary to expand the scope of workers considered by historiography. This includes acknowledging the presence of Iberian workers in the pearl fisheries and examining the unsuccessful attempts to incorporate enslaved African divers. As mentioned earlier, the Canoe Lords faced significant pressure from local indigenous power structures and a sharp decline in the indigenous populations of the Greater Antilles, where they had established more effective territorial control. Consequently, they were compelled to continually explore alternative sources of labour. For this reason, from 1526 onwards, reports from the Cape Verde Islands off the West African coast noted the presence of pearl traders seeking enslaved divers for work on Cubagua. However, this attempt failed due to resistance from many inhabitants of the pearl

[54]Irving Rouse, *The Tainos: Rise and Decline of the People Who Greeted Columbus* (New Haven, CT, 1993).

[55]Jose R. Oliver, *Caciques and Cemi Idols: The Web Spun by Taino Rulers between Hispaniola and Puerto Rico* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 2009); William F. Keegan, *The "Classic" Taíno* (Oxford, 2013); *idem* and Corinne L. Hofman, *The Caribbean before Columbus* (London, 2016).

[56]See Rossana Barragán and David Mayer, "Latin America and the Caribbean", in Karin Hofmeester and Marcel van der Linden (eds), *Handbook Global History of Work* (Berlin [etc.], 2017). Available at: https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110424584-005; last accessed 3 January 2023.

[57]William L. Sherman, *Forced Native Labor in Sixteenth-Century Central America* (Lincoln, NE, 1979); Frank Moya Pons, "The Politics of Forced Indian Labour in La Española 1493–1520", *Antiquity*, 66:250 (1992), pp. 130–139.

[58]On coerced labour, see Marcel van der Linden, "Dissecting Coerced Labor", in *idem* and Magaly Rodríguez García (eds), *On Coerced Labor: Work and Compulsion after Chattel Slavery* (Leiden, 2016), pp. 291–322; Christian G. De Vito and Fia Sundevall, "Free and Unfree Labour: An Introduction to this Special Issue", *Arbetarhistoria*, 163 (2017); Viola F. Müller, "Introduction: Labor Coercion, Labor Control, and Workers' Agency", *Labor History*, 60:6 (2019), pp. 865–868.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859024000567 Published online by Cambridge University Press

fisheries, who feared that enslaved Wolof people, also known to be Muslims, might take control of the island.[59]

Another important element of understanding labour coercion in the pearl fisheries involves overcoming the binary framework of enslaved indigenous workers and Iberian Canoe Lords often constructed in the historiography. Labour coercion in fact involves a nuanced spectrum of relationships where an "employer" forces or commits workers to produce through various strategies, including specific types of contracts, threats, deception, and violence. Coercive relationships cannot be understood solely based on ethnic or actor origins. In other words, labour coercion affected not only indigenous workers, such as the *naborías*, but also precarious Iberian workers or those vulnerable to the power exercised by the pearl elites.

One significant form of labour coercion in the pearl fisheries was debt bondage, a mechanism for recruiting Iberian workers. Some contracts signed by residents of Seville committed them "to serve as [a] canoe operator for three years, extracting pearls with the Indians".[60] The cases of Luis Salcedo and Luis Miranda illustrate this condition. Both signed contracts with Juan de la Barrera to settle the debts of their deceased fathers.[61] These cases demonstrate that even the death of a worker does not necessarily terminate a coercive labour relationship, as the obligation could persist across generations, extending the commitment established under coercion to the descendants of the deceased worker. Salcedo and Miranda acted as supervisors of the indigenous divers and also directly participated in diving for oysters, especially in locating new oyster beds.[62]

Another form of labour coercion evident in the sources was the employment of convicts as rowers and pearl fishers. Convicts were used both in fleets to the island of Margarita and the Gulf of Cariaco and in pearl fishing itself. In this context, labour coercion was manifested through threats and restricted options, where sea workers had to follow specific instructions or face the consequences. Coercion strategies based on threats often overlapped with physical violence.[63] The cases of Juan Pérez, Francisco Carmona, and Francisco Albertos illustrate these repressive strategies. Pérez was imprisoned for owing money to Juan Xadraque, another resident on the island, and failing to honour the commitment. Carmona was detained as a suspect in the theft of a sow – found dead under his bed – from the friars of a convent in San Francisco. Albertos was found guilty of stealing eight marks of pearls, a crime against the crown since the pearls had not been declared.[64] These convicts were not only made to work but were also often mistreated,

[59]Fidel Rodríguez Velásquez, "Rodrigo Lopes. Una historia conectada de trabajo, esclavitud y libertad en el mundo atlantico", in Fidel Rodríguez Velasquez, Julimar Mora Silva, and María Elena Meneses Muro (eds), *Los mundo del trabajo. Sociabilidad, resistencias y vidas en movimiento* (Mexico City, 2024), pp. 41–70.

[60]Oficio I Libro I Escribanía Alonso de la Barrera Folio encuaderno 22 de enero fecha 26 de enero signatura 51, Archivo Histórico Provincial de Sevilla [hereafter, AHPs], p. 1536.

[61]*Ibid.*; Libro del año de 1536 oficio I Libro I Escribanía Alonso de la Barrera Folio encuaderno 22 de enero fecha 26 de enero signatura 51, AHPs, p. 1536.

[62]"Luis Lampiñán, vecino de la ciudad de Sevilla".

[63]On managing labour through punishment, see Christian G. de Vito and Adam S. Fagbore, "Introduction: Punitive Perspectives on Labour Management", *International Review of Social History*, 68: SI31 (2023), pp. 1–14.

[64]"Declaraciones de Gonzalo Hernández", AGI, Justicia, 8, fo. 45r.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859024000567 Published online by Cambridge University Press

according to witnesses. Juan Pérez, for example, was stabbed in the leg with a dagger by the pearl overseer Juan López de Archuleta after threatening to disobey him. Meanwhile, Albertos received beatings from one of López de Archuleta's assistants and was threatened with hanging if he refused to work.[65]

Another important aspect is that the labour conditions of Iberian workers were not necessarily static. Some wage workers who initially worked as canoe operators and divers could transition into forced labourers under the threat of imprisonment if they refused to comply. This threat effectively restricted their freedoms. Examples include Juan de Córdoba, Gonzalo Rodríguez, and Juan Frías, who were imprisoned and constantly threatened with corporal punishment for refusing to work without pay.[66]

Expanding the analysis to include a broader spectrum of workers reveals that the sustained growth in pearl extraction during this period in the city of Nueva Cádiz was driven by the coexistence of various forms of coerced labour.

Navigating Labour Shifts

With the abandonment of the city of Nueva Cádiz in the 1540s, pearl fishing operations shifted their focus to the Guajira Peninsula. Despite being on the mainland, this region shared similar geographical and environmental conditions with the island of Cubagua. What changes can be observed in labour organizations with these spatial shifts? From an administrative standpoint, the royal officials of Cubagua retained their positions, unchanged in the new geography of Caribbean pearl fishing.[67] Work at sea also remained largely unchanged. However, the pearl fisheries underwent significant modifications from legal, labour, and organizational standpoints.

The debates on indigenous slavery persisted, and the ordinances of the monarchy reflected the important directions these debates were taking. During the 1530s, at least four significant resolutions on this matter can be identified from the sources. The first, in 1530, declared the enslavement of indigenous peoples through ransom or just war illegal anywhere in the Americas.[68] Only indigenous peoples enslaved by their communities could be legally considered as such. Subsequently, the decree of 11 December 1534 reinstated this possibility while also prohibiting the enslavement of indigenous women and children under the age of fourteen. The decree text also suggests that women and children be employed as *naborías* without being branded or able to be sold.[69] Next, the royal decrees of the queen dated 27 October 1535, addressed to the governor of Venezuela and the royal officials of Hispaniola,

[65]"Declaraciones de Cristóbal Garrucho", AGI, Justicia, 8, fo. 55r.

[66]*Ibid.*, fo. 54r.

[67]Manuel Luengo Muñoz, "Noticias sobre la Fundación de la Ciudad de Nuestra Señora Santa Maria de los Remedios del Cabo de la Vela", *Anuario de Estudios Americanos*, 6 (1949), pp. 755–798.

[68]"Provision que manda que no se pueda captiuar, ni hazer esclauo a ningun Indio", in *Colección de documentos inéditos relativos al descubrimiento, conquista y organización de las antiguas posesiones españolas de ultramar. Segunda serie*, vol. 10 (Madrid, 1897), pp. 38–43.

[69]"Real provisión donde se declara la forma y orden que se ha de guardar en hacer esclavos en la guerra y con rescates", in *Colección de documentos inéditos (Segunda serie)*, pp. 192–203.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859024000567 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ordered an investigation into illegal slavery in the province, which was perceived as becoming a centre of illicit indigenous slavery.[70] Finally, the prohibition of 17 March 1536 required monarchy officials to restrict the sending of enslaved indigenous peoples to the Iberian Peninsula without the governor's permission.[71]

The regulation that set age as an important factor in determining the legality of indigenous slavery resulted in age becoming a reflected detail in the documentation. Thus, it is possible to note that most pearl fishers were approximately between twenty and thirty years old, with forty per cent being around thirty years old and thirty-one per cent around twenty years old. These data were likely estimated by the enslavers, so they should be considered approximate.[72] However, these ages generally correspond to those reported for indigenous workers in other regions of the Americas, such as the Andean silver mines.

Later, the legal discussions led to the promulgation of the Royal Ordinances of 20 November 1542, widely known as the "Leyes Nuevas" (New Laws of the Indies). These ordinances are considered among the most important legal texts of the Hispanic monarchy.[73] For this reason, they have occupied a central space in the historiographies of indigenous slavery and, in general, in the historiography of the so-called New World. The nuances in interpreting the impact of these laws are broad, ranging from the most apologetic views that consider them evidence of the benign policies of the Castilian kings towards Native Americans to perspectives that deem them utterly useless in a scenario where the exploitation of indigenous labour remained central.

The enactment of the 1542 ordinances aimed to reform governance in the Americas and address complaints of abuse against indigenous peoples by establishing legal provisions related to their rights and freedoms. The most relevant chapters of these ordinances are Chapters 21, 23, and 25.[74] Chapter 21 was of utmost importance as it abolished indigenous slavery for any original and legal cause, such as war, religion, or ransom. This provision recognized indigenous peoples as free beings and vassals of the Castilian crown. Chapter 23 ordered the *audiencias* (provincial appeals courts) to declare free those indigenous individuals whose owners did not present legitimate titles of their possession as enslaved people. Additionally, it contemplated the appointment of officials to protect this right, aiming to strengthen the defence of indigenous peoples against slavery and servitude. Finally, Chapter 25 prohibited the forced labour of free indigenous peoples in pearl fisheries and

[70]"Informaciones de la Reina", in Enrique Otte (ed.), *Cedularios de la monarquía española relativos a la provincia de Venezuela (1529–1552)*, vol. 2 (Caracas, 1960), pp. 13–14.

[71]"Real cédula que manda que ninguna persona pueda traer dé las Indias a estos Reynos ningún yndio á título de esclavo", in *Colección de documentos inéditos (Segunda serie)*, pp. 317–319.

[72]"Comisión dada por el rey en la ciudad de Nuestra Señora de los Remedios del Río de la Hacha, al licenciado Juan Pérez de Tolosa, para que los dueños de la grangería de las perlas, no obligasen a sus indios a trabajar forzosamanete. 1 pieza" (1548–1549), AGI, Justicia, 649, no. 1.

[73]Juan Pérez de Tudela, "La gran reforma carolina de las Indias en 1542", *Revista de Indias*, 73 (1958), pp. 463–510; Nancy E. van Deusen, *Global Indios: The Indigenous Struggle for Justice in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Durham, NC, 2015); Adrian Masters, "¿Por qué se decretaron las Leyes Nuevas de 1542?", *Revista de Indias*, 82:285 (2022), pp. 293–327.

[74]María Ángeles Eugenio, "'Encadenados a los topos'. Ordenamiento sobre esclavitud indígena", *Ibero-amerikanisches Archiv*, 20:3 (1994), pp. 247–278.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859024000567 Published online by Cambridge University Press

mandated the protection of enslaved individuals. This aimed to shield indigenous peoples from abuse and exploitation in this economic activity and guarantee their freedom and well-being.

While these provisions aimed to protect the rights of the natives, similar to the 1512 Laws of Burgos, in practice, they ended up facilitating the labour exploitation of all indigenous peoples. Despite measures to protect indigenous peoples, the continuity of pearl fisheries was subject to the oversight of authorities and political elites who had direct interests in the exploitation of pearl banks. For example, in Cubagua, officials of the pearl fisheries were also participants in the business. Additionally, although the enslavement of new indigenous peoples was prohibited, it was considered legal for those who were already enslaved to remain so. Furthermore, new forms of labour coercion emerged, targeting the forced labour of free indigenous peoples.

The enactment of the New Laws led to at least three significant *visitas* (inspections) to the pearl fisheries. The first was launched on 16 June 1544, led by Friar Martín de Calatayud, bishop of the province of Santa Marta. The second *visita* began on 17 October 1548 by Licentiate Juan Pérez de Tolosa, who had been commissioned on 5 June 1546 as the judge of residence for the province of Venezuela and Cabo de la Vela. The third *visita* was carried out by Pablo Collado in 1558, serving as a commissioned judge with the rod of justice for another inspection in the pearl fishery of Cabo de la Vela. The documentation produced by these *visitas* is the primary source for understanding the changes and transformations that the New Laws brought about in the labour organization of the pearl fisheries and the lives of indigenous workers.

What exactly were these *visitas*? Paula Zagalsky has addressed the conceptual theme of the *visita* in his studies on the Andean world of labour.[75] In brief, *visitas* can be defined as a series of inspections ordered by the royal authority aimed at investigating and resolving issues related to indigenous governance, the assessment of tributes, human and material resources, jurisdictional conflicts, and demographic crises – in other words, addressing any imbalance. Zagalsky proposes that *visitas* have traditionally been studied from three perspectives. The first, based on legal history, focuses on institutions and laws, minimizing the importance of the names and actions of those visited. The second paradigm centres on exploring the past of indigenous societies, considering *visitas* as alternative sources that allow understanding of the self-perception of the colonized. Finally, the third model, developed in the 1980s and based on semiotic theory and discourse analysis, questions the neutrality of information extracted from *visitas* and highlights the importance of the production context in interpreting oral testimonies. In the case of the pearl fisheries, as in the study of indigenous workers in the Andean mining industry, the interest in *visitas* relates to the information they provide about changes in the world of labour.

The *visitas* revealed significant changes in the labour organization of the pearl fisheries. For example, the pearl fisheries in Cabo de la Vela had a much larger

[75]Paula Zagalsky, "Huellas en las revisitas. Tensión social e imposiciones coloniales", *Memoria Americana*, 17:2 (2009), pp. 241–279.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859024000567 Published online by Cambridge University Press

number of indigenous workers compared to those on Cubagua. While the largest *ranchería* in Cubagua, belonging to Diego Caballero, had forty workers (see Table 1), including men and women, Cabo de la Vela had at least two *rancherías* with more than double this number and two others that significantly exceeded it. The largest *ranchería* in Cabo de la Vela, owned by Bartolomé Carreño, with 108 men and six women, followed by Diego Núñez de Beltrán's *ranchería* with ninety-six men and six women. Caballero's *ranchería* in Cabo de la Vela was larger than his one in Cubagua, with forty-nine men and six women.[76] The number of men seems to have grown by nearly 100 per cent in some cases, while the number of women increased by around fifty per cent.

Another significant difference relates to the management of labour and the exploitation of oyster banks. In Cubagua, each Canoe Lord could only exploit one oyster bank because they owned only one boat.[77] However, in Cabo de la Vela, inventories like those of Carreño reflect ownership of six canoes with their gear. This meant that each *ranchería* could simultaneously exploit multiple oyster banks and employ complementary fishing strategies regarding depths and rest days.[78]

The increase in the number of workers had implications for the internal configuration of each *ranchería*. Unlike Cubagua, where enslaved divers had enjoyed some freedom of action and movement after their workday, Cabo de la Vela implemented jails for the divers. Consequently, it became the responsibility of the canoe operator to chain and unchain the divers at the beginning and end of each workday. An aspect of the changes in the freedom of the pearl fishers can be understood by analysing body markings. Enslaved workers were branded to indicate that the corresponding taxes had been paid to the crown. The brand also identified where these taxes had been paid, making it an important mark for identifying slave markets. The figures varied over time. However, using the king's brand as an unequivocal indicator of slavery, in around 1550 there was a ratio of 96 per cent enslaved workers to 4 per cent free workers. The percentage of free workers must be divided between *naborías* and voluntary free workers. These figures do not include Iberian workers, whose proportions are not recorded in the inventories. Regarding the slave markets, the data indicates that 86 per cent of the enslaved workers were branded in Cubagua, 7 per cent in Maracapana, 3 per cent in Margarita, 3 per cent in Santo Domingo, and 1 per cent in Cabo de la Vela (see Figure 4).

Examining the proportions of different labour forms in other parts of the Americas provides a broader context for understanding the unique characteristics of the workforce in pearl fisheries. Extensive research on miners in Hispaniola, New Spain (Mexico), and Peru has highlighted the coexistence of various labour regimes. In Hispaniola, as detailed in Silvio Zavala's pioneering work,[79] the workforce was divided among *repartimientos*, *encomiendas*,[80] and

[76]"Comisión […] Juan Pérez de Tolosa".

[77]Otte, in *Las perlas del Caribe*, points out the exception of Matín Alonso Alemán as the only owner of two canoes on the island of Cubagua.

[78]"Comisión […] Juan Pérez de Tolosa".

[79]Silvio Zavala, *La encomienda indiana* (Mexico City, 1935).

[80]In operation in colonial Spanish America from as early as 1499, the *repartimiento* ("distribution, partition, or division") system allowed certain colonists to recruit indigenous peoples for forced labour. A

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859024000567 Published online by Cambridge University Press

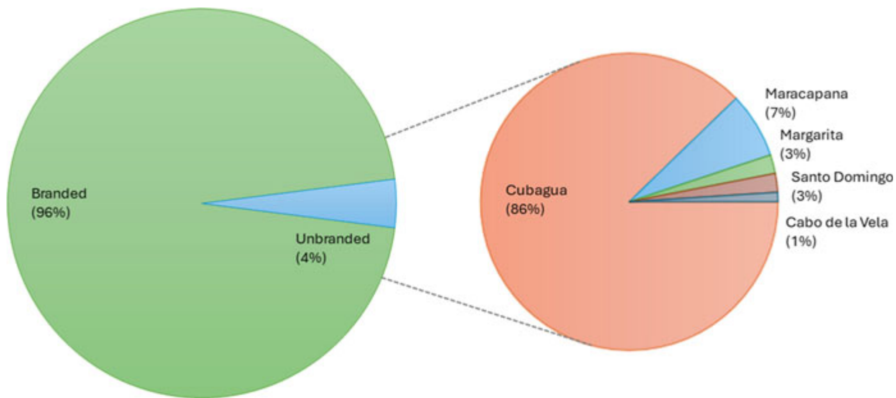

Figure 4. *Left*: Percentages of branded versus unbranded indigenous workers in the Caribbean pearl fisheries. *Right*: Percentages by branding site. Created by the author based on data from "Comisión dada por el Rey en la ciudad de Nuestra Señora […] 1 pieza" (1548–1549).

enslaved peoples.[81] Based on data from Moya Pons and Mira Caballos in Hispaniola, we can estimate that by the second decade of the sixteenth century, 64 per cent of workers were *encomiendas*, 28 per cent were *naborías*, and 7 per cent were enslaved Africans.[82] Indigenous slavery, although widespread, began to be legally regulated during this period, resulting in limited precise data.

Early studies by Enrique Tandeter, Carlos Sempat Assadourian, and Peter Bakewell have outlined the distribution of labour forms in the Andes,[83] a topic further discussed in recent research by Raquel Gil Montero and Paula Zagalsky.[84] It is thus possible to point out that, in the Andean regions, the labour force was divided among independent wage workers, including those known as *yanaconas* and *mingas*, and

colonist who wanted a *repartimiento* had to apply to the viceroy or the *audiencia*, stating that the supplemental labour required on his *ranchería* or in his mine would provide the country with essential food and goods. Legally defined in 1503, the *encomienda* system (from the Spanish verb *encomendar*, "to entrust") issued grants to conquistadors, soldiers, and the like of a specified number of "Indios" living in a particular area. The receiver of the grant (the *encomendero*) could exact tribute from the "Indios" in gold, in kind, or in labour but was required to protect them and instruct them in the Christian faith. See the relevant entries at https://www.britannica.com/.

[81]Pons, "Politics of Forced Indian Labour"; Fabricio Vivas Ramírez, *El cobre americano en la política de Castilla: siglos XVI–XVII* (Caracas, 2009), pp. 230–231.

[82]Pons, "Politics of Forced Indian Labour", p. 134; Esteban Mira Caballos, *El indio antillano. Repartimiento, encomienda y esclavitud (1492–1542)* (Seville, 1997), p. 52.

[83]Enrique Tandeter, "Forced and Free Labour in Late Colonial Potosi", *Past & Present*, 93 (1981), pp. 98–136; Carlos Sempat Assadourian, "El sistema de la economía colonial. Mercado interno, regiones y espacio económico", *Historia Mexicana* (1982), pp. 419–453; Peter John Bakewell, *Miners of the Red Mountain: Indian Labor in Potosí, 1545–1650* (Albuquerque, NM, 1984).

[84]Raquel Gil Montero, "Free and Unfree Labour in the Colonial Andes in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries", *International Review of Social History*, 56:SI19 (2011), pp. 297–318. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859011000472; last accessed 15 November 2023; Paula Cecilia Zagalsky, "Trabajadores indígenas mineros en el Cerro Rico de Potosí. Tras los rastros de sus prácticas laborales (siglos XVI y XVII)", *Revista Mundos do Trabalho*, 6:12 (2014), pp. 55–82.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859024000567 Published online by Cambridge University Press

forced labourers known as *mitayos*.[85] These categories were fluid, with individuals potentially moving between them over time.[86]

In the case of pearl fisheries, there were no labour policies equivalent to *repartimientos*, *encomiendas*, or *mita*. Like in Hispaniola and other American regions, the labour force of pearl fisheries during the first half of the sixteenth century was primarily composed of indigenous populations, with Africans arriving in very small numbers and Iberians participating under various labour arrangements.[87] The fundamental difference in the indigenous workforce in pearl fisheries compared to their Caribbean and Andean counterparts, as shown in Figure 4, is the high proportion of enslaved indigenous workers. In the Caribbean pearl fisheries, 96 per cent of the workforce consisted of enslaved (branded) indigenous workers, a stark contrast to other regions where enslaved indigenous workers comprised less than 50 per cent of the labour force. Another significant detail pertains to the origin of these enslaved workers. Despite the reported extensive mobility of indigenous workers throughout the Caribbean since the early sixteenth century, 86 per cent of enslaved workers were branded on the island of Cubagua itself.

The island of Cubagua served not only as a centre for pearl extraction, but also as a significant market for enslaved indigenous people. Although precise figures are unavailable, these enslaved individuals from Cubagua were often sold for various tasks beyond pearl fisheries. According to both Weildler Guerra Curvelo and Erin Woodruff Stone, they were utilized as replacement workers in the emerging sugar plantations in the Greater Antilles and sent to new areas of Iberian activity in the Americas. This trade enriched certain royal officials, particularly those responsible for applying the king's brand, who received a commission for each branded indigenous person.[88] Nancy van Deusen has reported that enslaved indigenous women from Cubagua in the viceroyalty of Peru were identifiable by the "G" or "R" marked on their faces, indicating their enslaved status,[89] with "G", from the Spanish word for war (*guerra*), being used to mark indigenous people captured in combat and "R" marking indigenous people coming from Rescates.[90] The circulation of

[85]See Paula Zagalsky and Paola Revilla, "Mitas coloniales. Ampliando universos analíticos", *Diálogo Andino*, 69 (2022), pp. 6–7.

[86]Allison Bigelow, "Knowledge Production and Forced Labor: The Intellectual Work and Worlds of Andean Mitayos in the Late Colonial Period", *Revista Mundos do Trabalho*, 15 (2023), pp. 1–21.

[87]See Miguel Acosta Saignes, *Vida de los esclavos negros* (Caracas, 1984); Rodríguez Velásquez, "Rodrigo Lopes".

[88]Weildler Guerra Curvelo, "La ranchería de las perlas del Cabo de la Vela (1538–1550)", *Huellas. Revista de la Universidad del Norte*, 49–50 (1997), pp. 33–51, 39; Erin Woodruff Stone, *Captives of Conquest: Slavery in the Early Modern Spanish Caribbean* (Philadelphia, PA, 2021), p. 105.

[89]Nancy E. van Deusen, "Diasporas, Bondage, and Intimacy in Lima, 1535 to 1555", *Colonial Latin American Review*, 19:2 (2010), pp. 247–277. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/10609164.2010.493685; last accessed 16 December 2023; Nancy van Deusen, "The Intimacies of Bondage: Female Indigenous Servants and Slaves and Their Spanish Masters, 1492–1555", *Journal of Women's History*, 24:1 (2012), pp. 13–43.

[90]Carmen Mena García, "Los inicios de la esclavitud indígena en el Darién y la desaparición de los 'Cuevas'", in Gabriela Dalla-Corte Caballero, Ricardo Piqueras Céspedes, and Meritxell Tous Mata (eds), *América. Poder, conflicto y política* (Murcia, 2013), pp 1–20, 7.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859024000567 Published online by Cambridge University Press

enslaved indigenous peoples from Cubagua throughout the Caribbean, the Pacific, and the Atlantic is further evidenced by population data from Panama and the stories of Inés and María, two indigenous women from the Pearl Coast who obtained their freedom in Sevillian notaries.[91]

Despite the growth of slavery and the oppressive control of indigenous workers, incentives for the best divers persisted. As noted by Eduardo Barrera Monroy, some divers even enjoyed separate housing with greater comfort, extended rest periods, and avoided the cruelty of the cold night-time chains.[92] However, these privileges came with the significant risk to life of diving in the deepest oyster banks. Both Barrera Monroy and María Ángeles Eugenio have described that among the privileges for the best divers was having an indigenous woman at their service. Sexual relationships, however, were explicitly prohibited due to the belief that they negatively impacted the divers' performance underwater – a prohibition that was nevertheless rarely enforced.[93]

These internal configurations of *rancherías* also underwent significant changes. In Cubagua, archaeological evidence has allowed us to locate these workspaces, ranging from six to ten square metres, occupying a total area between 200 and 600 square metres. These dimensions were inferred from the dispersion of olive jar fragments, Columbia Plain plates, and coarse earthenware potsherds recovered superficially. In contrast, in Cabo de la Vela, spaces for fortified houses were incorporated within the *rancherías*, which were managed by Iberian workers. Unlike in Cubagua, where this space was located in the Veedor de Perlas' House in the city, in Cabo de la Vela, it was part of the *ranchería*. Prisons were also incorporated in Cabo de la Vela, unlike in Cubagua, where pearl divers slept chained during the night. Archaeological work in the Cabo de la Vela region has focused on delineating zones of exclusive European and indigenous use. Similar to Cubagua, there is a clear boundary between the city and the workspaces of the pearl *rancherías*.[94] It is estimated that the dimensions of these spaces in Cabo de la Vela were larger than those in Cubagua since they accommodated a greater number of workers. However, archaeological studies conducted in this region have not yet proposed specific dimensions.

In both Cubagua and Cabo de la Vela, archaeological findings of mollusc shells, coupled with archival data, reveal significant insights into the dietary practices of pearl divers. In Cubagua, the diet primarily consisted of cassava bread (*cazabe*) and a wide variety of molluscs, including pearl-producing oysters and conch. Other seafood, such as fish, turtles, and other types of snails, were also part of the diet, albeit to a lesser extent. This dietary pattern reflects a continuation of pre-European indigenous diets. Conch, in particular, was a major protein source due to its easy accessibility, high spatial concentration, rapid reproduction rates, and low risk and

[91]"Informaciones sobre la población de Panamá" (1552), AGI, Patronato, 26, ramo 26, fos 1r–208r.

[92]Monroy, "Los esclavos de las perlas", p. 9.

[93]*Ibid*.; María Ángeles Eugenio, "Situación de la mujer en las rancherías de perlas del Cabo de la Vela", *Anuario de Hojas de Warmi*, 13 (2002), pp. 95–111, 104.

[94]Marcela Bernal Arévalo, "Control social en el asentamiento colonial Nuestra Señora Santa María de los Remedios del Cabo de la Vela", *Revista Colombiana de Antropología*, 51:2 (2015), pp. 241–263.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859024000567 Published online by Cambridge University Press

cost associated with its exploitation.[95] Studies by Andrzej Antczak and colleagues have demonstrated that the relationship between indigenous peoples and the exploitation of these molluscs dates back at least 7,000 years.[96] Thousands of shell remains scattered across various islands in the southern Caribbean provide evidence of this long-standing dietary practice. Furthermore, these shells were used to construct tools that were not only utilized in the exploitation of other marine products, but also as currency for trade with coastal communities in the central littoral region for at least 5,500 years.[97]

In contrast, in Cabo de la Vela, food was used as an important mechanism for regulating work. Iberian overseers ensured that the divers' pre-workday food intake was minimal, typically providing only arepas made from cornflour, prepared by the indigenous women in the settlement. The belief was that regulating food intake was essential for optimizing the divers' performance during their workday. This food restriction extended to prohibiting the consumption of the oysters themselves, which were the by-product of pearl harvesting. Visiting officials even reported nauseating odours emanating from the unused oysters at the worksites due to this prohibition on consumption.[98]

The use of food restriction by overseers was a significant issue during the *visitas*. When the aforementioned Friar Martín de Calatayud of Santa Marta visited the pearl fisheries in 1544, he ordered an improvement in the diet of the indigenous workers, stating that "they should give all the Indians who work in the said pearl fishery at least a sufficient meal of fish or meat every day so that they can endure their work".[99] The punishment for non-compliance was the freedom of the enslaved indigenous people. Similarly, during his *visita* in 1548, Juan Pérez de Tolosa decreed that the indigenous workers should be given "ordinarily every day, among four Indians, a bushel filled with corn in loaves, and that they should be given fish or meat once a day".[100] De Tolosa's innovation was to impose fines of 1,000 maravedis on those who violated this order. In the third *visita* in 1558, Pablo Collado also addressed the issue, mandating that each *ranchería* possess a fishing net (*chinchorro*) to be used daily for providing food for the indigenous

[95]Elisabeth S. Wing, "Animal Remains Excavated at the Spanish Site of Nueva Cadiz on Cubagua Island, Venezuela", *Nieuwe West-Indische Gids / New West Indian Guide*, May (1962), pp. 162–165; Lee A. Newsom and Elisabeth S. Wing, *On Land and Sea: Native American Uses of Biological Resources in the West Indies* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 2004), ch. 5: "Southern Caribbean Region"; Ma. Magdalena Antczak and Andrzej T. Antczak, *Los ídolos de las islas Prometidas. Arqueología prehispánica del archipiélago de Los Roques* (Caracas, 2006).

[96]Andrzej T. Antczak, Luis A. Lemoine Buffet, Ma. Magdalena Antczak, and Valentí Rull, "Early Indigenous Occupations of Margarita Island and the Venezuelan Caribbean", in Corinne L. Hofman and Andrzej T. Antczak (eds), *Early Settlers of the Insular Caribbean: Dearchaizing the Archaic* (Leiden, 2019), pp. 131–146, 138.

[97]Antczak and Antczak, *Los ídolos de las islas*, ch. 9: "Materiales no cerámicos de Dos Mosquises. Moluscos marinos y terrestres".

[98]For more on odours, see Monroy, "Los esclavos de las perlas", p. 5.

[99]"Comisión dada por el rey en la ciudad de Nuestra Señora de los Remedios del Río de la Hacha, al licenciado Juan Pérez de Tolosa, para que los dueños de la grangería de las perlas, no obligasen a sus indios a trabajar forzosamanete" (13 April 1544), AGI, Justicia, 649, no. 1, fos 7r–8v.

[100]"Notas al pie de la sentencia de Tolosa" (7 January 1549), AGI, Justicia 649, no. 1.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859024000567 Published online by Cambridge University Press

divers.[101] These concerns likely stemmed from fears of diseases that could devastate entire crews of high-seas sailors during that time.[102] However, they were also rooted in food hierarchies based on the belief that indigenous peoples were greedy and incapable of providing themselves with adequate food, being content with very little.[103]

The *visitas* demonstrated a growing dominance and influence of royal authorities not directly involved in the pearl fisheries business, contrasting with the absolute control previously enjoyed by the Canoe Lords and their affiliated officials in Cubagua. Despite this increasing influence, however, the Canoe Lords continued to play an important role in the administration and political control of pearl exploitation and the workers. De Calatayud's 1544 *visita* is an example of this. It concluded with the public announcement – on 18 July in the city of Nuestra Señora de los Remedios and on the 22nd in the *rancherías* – of measures aimed at improving the living conditions of enslaved indigenous peoples and punishing some offenders. However, like in Cubagua, the Canoe Lords in Cabo de la Vela managed to have all of De Calatayud's provisions annulled by the Council of the Indies, arguing that the *visita* was not executed adequately.[104] Consequently, a new *visita* was commissioned on 5 June 1546, under the direction of De Tolosa.

De Tolosa's *visita* exemplifies the shift in power dynamics and the labour transformations implemented, highlighting the increased influence of crown officials not directly involved in the pearl business. Commencing on 17 October 1548, it enacted several measures outlined in the New Laws. The most notable was the appointment of Pedro de Gámez as the public defender of the indigenous peoples on 14 November. This appointment empowered De Gámez to report mistreatment and defend the freedom of those he deemed necessary. Unlike De Calatayud's *visita*, this one successfully liberated some indigenous individuals such as Francisco Prieto, Alonso de Cariaco, Mariota, and Alvaro, despite opposition from Juan de Rivas, appointed as procurator on behalf of the Canoe Lords.

A significant deterrent measure established during the *visita* was the death penalty and confiscation of assets for those found guilty of employing indigenous individuals against their will in pearl fishing, with a punishment of one hundred lashes for those who did so behind the backs of the Canoe Lord.[105] However, despite these measures, it was ruled that "the said owners of such slaves may, without any impediment, make use of and engage in the extraction of the said pearls".[106] De Tolosa's ruling itself acknowledged the Royal Provision of 1533, which legitimized the possession of

[101]"Ordenanzas de Collado en Nuestra Señora de los Remedios" (5 September 1560), AGI, Justicia 649, no. 1, fos 252v–260r.

[102]Jaime Rodrigues, "Um sepulcro grande, amplo e fundo. Saúde alimentar no Atlântico, séculos XVI ao XVIII", *Revista de História (São Paulo)*, 168 (2013), pp. 325–350. Available at: https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.2316-9141.v0i168p323-350; last accessed 14 November 2023.

[103]Gregorio Saldarriaga, "Comer y ser. La alimentación como política de la diferenciación en la América española, siglos XVI y XVII", *Varia Historia*, 32 (2016), pp. 53–77.

[104]"Alonso de Torreblanca, escribano y alguacil mayor, a Juan Riberos, Petición del cabildo, Nuestra Señora de los Remedios" (18 June 1544), AGI, Justicia, 649, no. 1.

[105]"Sentencia de Tolosa" (7 January 1549), AGI, Justicia, 649, no. 1.

[106]*Ibid.*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859024000567 Published online by Cambridge University Press

enslaved indigenous people taken from Cubagua and their use in pearl fishing by their owners.[107] Thus, any indigenous person branded in Cubagua was declared a legitimate enslaved individual, thus also susceptible to being sold.

A year after De Tolosa's *visita*, a royal decree arrived at the pearl fisheries, reinforcing some of the inspector's discussions and demanding the implementation of measures known since the 1530s. This included the declaration of freedom for all women, regardless of age, and all males under fourteen years old, demonstrating the monarchy's intent to enforce legal regulations, implement the New Laws, and exert more significant control over the pearl fisheries, which had resisted external oversight until then.

One of the most important provisions of this royal decree concerned establishing wages for free indigenous people, both women working on land and men working at sea. This is the first known provision specifically addressing wages for indigenous workers in the pearl fisheries, although it did not specify the amount or form of payment. Instead, it instructed the Canoe Lords to inquire about the will of the workers, "trying to ascertain their will secretly or as freely as they can express it".[108] Information on wages is indeed scarce, but María Ángeles Eugenio has suggested that the wages for women barely covered the minimum necessary for their sustenance, including food and basic clothing, sometimes supplemented with meats, bananas, and cheeses.[109] Eugenio also illustrates that, despite royal decrees and inspections, cases like the *rancherías* of San Juan de la Laguna continued to declare all indigenous women in service as legitimately enslaved.

Following De Tolosa's *visita*, it took more than ten years before another assessment of indigenous labour in the pearl fisheries was conducted. Pablo Collado's *visita* culminated on 5 September 1560, with results that extended beyond the material living conditions of the indigenous people.[110] Collado's reforms included the mandatory presence of a priest in the *rancherías*, paid for by the Canoe Lords, and the requirement for indigenous workers to attend mass, particularly on holidays when work was prohibited. Additionally, Collado instituted night-time doctrine sessions to teach the Christian faith to indigenous workers each night. Collado also introduced measures to regulate access to pearls and their circulation as a form of payment. He prohibited unauthorized maritime entries for trading and access to land for anyone outside the *rancherías*. Penalties for violating these regulations were severe: one hundred lashes for the first offence, two hundred lashes for the second, and the death penalty by hanging for the third.[111]

The three *visitas* – De Calatayud's, De Tolosa's, and Collado's – each brought about changes and ignited discussions, suggesting that, to some extent, they positively impacted the conditions of enslaved indigenous workers. However, despite these advancements, the exploitation of indigenous labour continued. This persistence

[107] Eugenio, "Encadenados a los topos", p. 257.
[108] "Real Cédula Sancho Clavijo" (7 October 1550), AGI, Justicia, 353, fos 6r–8v.
[109] Eugenio, "Situación de la mujer", p. 102.
[110] "Ordenanzas de Collado".
[111] *Ibid.*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859024000567 Published online by Cambridge University Press

can be attributed to various factors, including the entrenched resistance and power of the Canoe Lords and a lack of political will to rigorously enforce existing laws.

Conclusions

In the early stages of globalization, the Iberian empires must be understood beyond the conventional notions of conquest and colonization. The Caribbean pearl fisheries provide a compelling case for examining these initial phases. These periods were not solely defined by the monopoly of power and imperial violence; they were also times of experimentation. Specifically, they were periods of exploration into the labour forms necessary for exploiting oyster banks. These activities served as fertile ground for labour and social innovation, showcasing the complexity and dynamics of cultural and economic interactions in that historical context.

The temporal and spatial shifts in labour within the pearl fisheries offer an opportunity to challenge deeply rooted perceptions of labour during early modernity and the initial stages of globalization. One significant challenge is to move beyond the simplistic division between enslaved indigenous individuals and Canoe Lords often drawn in historical analyses. This oversimplification has hindered a nuanced understanding of the intricate dynamics of labour relations and the various forms of coercion prevalent at the time. Additionally, it has perpetuated a notion of equivalence between ethnic identity and the experience of labour coercion, overlooking the involvement of non-indigenous actors who were also engaged in similar power dynamics within the industry. Including these actors in our examination enriches our comprehension of the complexities inherent in labour exploitation in the pearl fisheries and power structures in the formative period of the Hispanic monarchy.

Re-evaluating the role of indigenous populations during this historical period is critical. Territorial control of continental areas near oyster beds imposed tangible limitations on the Iberians' expansion projects. This aspect challenges the historiographic dichotomy that views indigenous populations as an easily accessible labour force. The inability to overcome these territorial restrictions significantly contributed to the fact that Iberian and African workers were also subject to labour coercion. Moreover, examining the complex relationships and disputes among the various actors within the monarchy allows us to transcend monolithic views of the monarchy itself. The persistence of enslaved indigenous labour in the pearl fisheries, decades after the promulgation of the New Laws in 1542, exemplifies these disputes. These aspects open new perspectives on the colonialism exercised by the Iberian empires in their early stages and the labour transformations that followed.

Cite this article: Fidel Rodríguez Velásquez. Navigating Labour Shifts: Early Modern Pearl Fishing in the Caribbean (1521–1563). *International Review of Social History* (2024), pp. 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859024000567

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859024000567 Published online by Cambridge University Press