

Date: 1522, January 6. City of Santo Domingo.

Theme: The Christmas 1521 Black slaves' rebellion of La Española, first mentioned in the colonial ordinances on Blacks of January 6th (Epiphany), 1522.

Source: Ministerio de Cultura de España. PARES, Portal de Archivos Españoles—Archivo General de Indias, PATRONATO, 295, Número 104. .

In early January of 1522, while one of Christopher Columbus's sons was the colonial governor of La Española, Spanish authorities were confronting a peculiar political dilemma vis-a-vis the growing Black population of the island-colony. The settlers, mostly Spaniards, had been using more and more enslaved black Africans, brought over either from Iberia or directly from Africa, first to mine gold, and then to do all the hard, and at times very fast-paced, physical work needed in the cane-sugar manufacturing estates that were becoming the new backbone of the colony's economy.

So many enslaved blacks had already been imported into the small colony that by the Christmas festivities of 1521 a number of them, apparently from different plantations and villages in the island, were infuriated enough with their enslavement to conceive of freeing themselves from their oppression, discuss with each other how to rise forcefully against their local Iberian masters, and finally launch a concerted rebellion that shocked Spanish settlers and instilled in them a great deal of fear, spreading a notion that what the rebelling Black slaves aspired to was to wipe out "the Christians" of the land and become the rulers of the colony.

The authorities, led by Governor Diego Colón, were able to quell the uprising, reportedly by applying harsh punishments that included the execution of a number of the rebels. But the rebellion also seems to have been perceived as dangerous enough to prompt the authorities to issue, on January 6 of 1522, Epiphany, very repressive laws specifically targeted at "Blacks and slaves" to prevent any further uprisings, prescribing a combination of great restriction of physical mobility, minimized access to weapons, punishment in the form of physical torture and executions, on the one hand, and increased access to black women with whom to engage in procreation and family relations as a mechanism to pacify the slaves, on the other.

This uprising of 1521 in La Española is the first recorded rebellion by black people in the Americas, understood as a planned confrontation with the authority of the Spanish colonizers. Until then, the main form of resistance by the enslaved black population consisted of *alzamientos* or escapes, on which practice the laws on blacks prior to 1522 had focused.