

Date: 1527, June 28. Valladolid, Spain.

Theme: Worried by the presence in La Española of a population of enslaved black men much larger than that of the white colonists who might attempt to rebel against the latter, king Charles V mandated the carrying of enslaved black women to the colony, and the promotion of marriage among “blacks”

Source: PARES, Portal de Archivos Españoles—Archivo General de Indias,INDIFERENTE,421,L.12, F.151R- 152R

By the early summer of 1527 the numeric disparity existing in La Española between a black-African (and mostly enslaved) population much larger than the free white Iberian population of colonists seems to have constituted such a great concern for king Charles V of Spain that he addressed it head on in a royal decree of June 28, indicating that this demographic imbalance “could be cause for some unrest or uprising among the said blacks seeing themselves strong and enslaved, or [that] they may flee to the mountains and escape from the farms and cattle ranches where they are, as they have some times tried, and there would be no entire security with them, and other damages and inconveniences could occur.”

According to the king, the Council of the Indies advised the Crown to mandate that all enslaved blacks (“negros”) already in La Española and those that could be sent there in the future should get married so that “each one may have his own woman because with this and with the love they would have for their wives and children and with the order of marriage it would be cause for much quiet from them and other sins and inconveniences would be avoided that otherwise occur.”

From the monarch’s letter we also learn that the general initiative to have La Española’s enslaved blacks married into couples confronted some troublesome precedent in a kind of resistance or challenge or instrumentalizing of Catholic indoctrination by the slaves that consisted of their arguing that getting into matrimony made them free and no longer obliged to serve their owners.

King Charles V’s response to the above described circumstance was to order that from then on anybody owing and enjoying at the time either a “general” or “special” license to “pass” enslaved blacks to La Española should be “compelled to pass one half of males and the other half of females of the [enslaved] persons for which they may have a license, so that they would take [there] as many of one [type] as of the other [type] and to get them married under law and church, the said blacks willing and on their free will.” The penalty for those not complying with the order, including those already enjoying a license to take slaves to the Indies, was the loss of the slaves involved, via confiscation by the Crown.

The royal order to the *Audiencia* of Santo Domingo and to the judicial officials of lower rank in the colony also mandated “all and any person, denizens and present in the said island who have or may hence forward have black slaves be compelled to have them married and do

have them married within the fifteen months following the publicizing of this our letter, being it the will of the said male and female blacks, since matrimony must be free and not forced, under penalty [for slave masters] that, not getting them married as it has been said, they be confiscated and by this letter we confiscate them for the said coffers and treasury of ours.” The order also clarified that “by getting them married and consenting to it their masters and lords it is not understood that they are free but slaves as if the said matrimony is not happening. As to the colonial officials found no to enforce the order, the penalty was the loss of all favor from the Crown and of all their personal assets.

The ordinance was to be read out loud publicly both “in the squares and markets of the city of Seville and in the cities, towns, and places of the Española island.”

Even if it is understood that the political intention to encourage the growth of La Española’s enslaved black population was favored by a natural predisposition, which would trigger as soon as the proximity or coexistence between a male adult black and a female adult black populations was allowed in the colony, the moral dilemma of trying to impose by force an act that, as it was explicitly proclaimed, should be of free choice for those interested, in this case the black enslaved population, was not contemplated in the royal order, and the question remains unanswered of what would happen in the cases where a male or female slave refused to get married in the terms that their legal masters might want to impose on them.