

Date: 1530, April 10. Santo Domingo.

Theme: Around 1530 in Santo Domingo, a female Black slave was burned at the stake accused of poisoning her female master

Source: PARES, Portal de Archivos Españoles--Archivo General de Indias, SANTO_DOMINGO,49,R.1, N.2

Long before the arrival of the Spaniards in the Americas, there was a well established tradition in Iberia of using enslaved Black persons as household servants, among other types of jobs. This type of slavery continued to be practiced in the new colonial societies settled after 1492, La Española being one of them.

Usually the work in sugar plantations is thought of as the worst of all in the colonial Americas, but enslaved work in colonial households sometimes seems to have been unbearable for the enslaved, as the case of this Black woman owned by a local clergyman and apparently working directly for a woman of Santo Domingo City in the year 1530 shows. She was accused of poisoning her female master, and though the documents do not say whether the poisoned master died or not, the enslaved woman was condemned to death and burnt at the stake.

This case shows us, therefore, that at least for some of the Black people thrown into slavery in the Americas in the early sixteenth-century, even the dynamics of slavery's oppression under the shadow of a roof could be felt as enough of a burden to risk one's life via a likely harshest punishment in exchange for the chance of some revenge or attempt of revenge as redress against someone else perceived as the source of one's suffering.

The incident and the recorded comments it generated not only shows that the members of the colonial Spanish Church were themselves owners of numerous slaves by the third decade of the century in La Española, but that this ownership generated confrontations between the clergymen and the colonial judicial officials of Santo Domingo over who would exercise enforcement of the laws over punishable behavior committed by enslaved Blacks.