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The Atlantic Framework of 17th-Century Colonization

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By the turn of the 17th century, Spain's European rivals had a mixed record in their efforts to dislodge the Spanish from the Caribbean. For all the aborted French, Dutch, and English settlements on the circum-Caribbean mainland and pirate bases nestled along well-protected coasts, Spain still held sway in the Americas and the Caribbean. But in the 1620s, Spain's rivals began to expel the Spanish from territory they had long claimed and often occupied in the western Atlantic, and the Caribbean was central to that process. The English took St. Christopher (1624), Barbados (1627), Nevis (1628), Providence (1630), Antigua (1632), Montserrat (1632), and Jamaica (1655) while the French claimed portions of the Spanish colony of Santo Domingo (1641), Saint-Christophe (1625), Guadeloupe (1635), and Martinique (1635). The Dutch focused less on land than on commerce, but they, too, established permanent claims to St. Martin (1631), Curaçao (1634), St. Eustatius (1635), and Saba (1640) in addition to Aruba and Bonaire (1634). Some of these islands (like Jamaica) were wrested from Spanish control,

while others had been unclaimed or abandoned by Spain, and were either bereft of human occupation (like Barbados) or settled by Carib Indians who, despite initial violent resistance to European invasions, were ultimately restricted to Dominica and St. Vincent by 1660. And some, such as St. Martin and St. Kitts, were shared, in one of the distinctive features of settlement in the region.

All of this European activity was part of multipronged global efforts by Spain's rivals to challenge Iberian hegemony on the North American mainland, on the coast of central Africa, in the Indian Ocean, and in the Caribbean itself. This chapter explores the Atlantic context that explains how and why northern Europeans were able to succeed in settling the Caribbean starting in the 1620s, and it concludes by addressing the Atlantic context of the Caribbean region's major transitions in the 1650s and 1660s. If European affairs shaped the initial settlement of the Caribbean and redefined its geopolitics, the Caribbean had by the mid-17th century become more tightly enmeshed in a web that included Africa and the American mainland.

Northern European ascendancy in the 17th-century Caribbean was primarily a story of Spanish weakness. Where previously Spain had had the financial reserves to build fortifications and staff them with sufficient armies to fend off rivals, and also to destroy interlopers who dared settle in Spanish territory (as the French had attempted in Florida in the 1560s), the general economic crisis that hit Europe in the early 1600s especially weakened Spain. Forced to prioritize defense spending, Spain focused its energies on its many wars in Europe, leaving Caribbean defenses to flag (Klooster 1997). At the same time England, the Netherlands, and France each enjoyed a brief interlude of internal peace, with the period's vicious religious wars over for a while. These three nations were even at peace with Spain—although, significantly, they did not recognize Spain's exclusive right to the West Indies, the region "beyond the line" or outside the boundaries of European treaties.

The United Provinces, which were not immediately affected by the economic crisis, were in an especially advantageous position, and in the early 1600s they made aggressive inroads in Brazil (seizing Pernambuco and Recife in 1630 from the Portuguese), in North America (establishing their first settlement in New Netherland in 1624), and on the African coast (seizing Elmina from the Portuguese in 1637). They were highly motivated to strike against the Spanish. In 1566, the Dutch had revolted against the Spanish Habsburgs who controlled the Netherlands. The rebellion merged with religious grievances in this age of deeply contested religious affiliations; the northern provinces tended to be Protestant, the southern provinces Catholic. The Caribbean figured in this mix at first in an indirect way. As the Dutch cast about for ways to critique their Spanish rulers, they drew on the writings of the Dominican friar, Bartolomé de las Casas, whose *Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* described Spain's conquest of the Caribbean in brutal and graphic detail. First published in Spanish in Seville in 1562, the book was reissued in Dutch

in Antwerp in 1578, and several editions in other languages soon followed. Tales of Spanish inhumanity in the Caribbean stood in for Spanish atrocities in the Netherlands; the ordeal of the Tainos represented the sufferings of the Dutch. Political and religious motivations joined to fuel Dutch attacks on Spain—at home, where the Dutch Republic emerged from the northern provinces, and in the Caribbean, where Dutch mariners and merchants dominated shipping and seized islands in the formerly Spanish sea. No constituency opposed peace with Spain more vigorously than the merchants who ran the Dutch West India Company (chartered in 1621) and regarded commerce and themselves as instruments of war.

Domestic affairs took a slightly different form in England, where the period from 1580 to 1640 was characterized by dramatic population growth (by some 40%). Increased population put strains on rents and food prices, which were exacerbated in some regions by the collapse of England's textile industries. One consequence of these intertwined demographic and economic pressures was increased migration, as men and some women traveled the kingdom and beyond in search of employment. These people made England's overseas growth possible by providing manpower for ships, armies, trading posts, agricultural settlements, colonies, and fisheries precisely at the moment of Spanish weakness.

Of those English who migrated west across the Atlantic in the 17th century, approximately 200,000—more than half—ventured to the Caribbean rather than to the American mainland. French migrants were even more likely than the English to choose the Caribbean, although they were also much less likely than the English to leave home in the first place. In 1645, some 8,500 French lived in the Caribbean, while New France (Canada) contained only about 300. Recruits were also available in both England and France because of domestic turmoil in mid-century. The wave of protests and rebellions in France known as the Fronde (1648–53) and civil war and revolution in England (1642–60) generated waves of political and economic refugees, many of whom found their way to the Caribbean, while others were forcibly deported there after being on the losing side of civil conflicts. Dutch migration, in contrast, was negligible. Curaçao contained some 600 men in the 1660s after 25 years of settlement, while New Netherland boasted several thousand. For the Dutch, a major global power in the 17th century, commercial enterprises in the East Indies always attracted more investment and manpower than did the small holdings in the West Indies.

A final crucial context that shaped rivals' aspirations for Caribbean land and resources lay in European consumer tastes. By the early 17th century Europeans craved tobacco, which was first introduced by Iberians. Although reviled by some critics (King James I of England deplored it as a "noxious weed"), the crop's alleged medicinal benefits helped overcome opposition, and smoking became a popular pastime. According to the Spanish doctor Nicolás Monardes in 1565, tobacco possessed

no fewer than 20 medicinal uses. It could cure gout, snake bite, gas, headaches, chest pains, skin diseases, and asthma (Norton 2008, 115–16). Europeans sought to meet the soaring demand for this marvelous and addictive substance through new arable land in the Caribbean. The crop was planted, with varying degrees of success, on most of the islands occupied by the French and English, and marketed in Europe. The substance was popular in Africa, too, and it emerged as an important trade good, as did the Dutch- and English-made pipes in which people smoked it. Another more pedestrian European consumer good also encouraged Caribbean incursions: herring. According to a Dutch adage, the herring fisheries were "the mother of all commerce" (Goslinga 1971, 116), and they boomed in the 17th century. Herring required salt for preservation, and after the Dutch lost access to Spanish salt sources, they found their way to the Caribbean, where they mined salt first at Punta de Araya (off the Venezuelan coast) and later at Bonaire, St. Martin, and Tortuga.

Although in many respects northern Europeans sought to emulate Spanish economic success in their own Caribbean exploits, they had to find solace in salt mines and tobacco crops instead of the silver mines they coveted. They also pursued their goals very differently. In their American and Caribbean conquests and settlements, the Spanish and Portuguese had created a variety of public institutions controlled directly by the crown. In contrast, the French, English, and Dutch relied on private companies to carry out their commercial and colonial efforts. These companies had a range of powers, including the right to wage war, establish armies, sue for peace, and make commercial treaties. The West India Company controlled Dutch activities in the Atlantic after 1621 and placed the responsibility for developing and populating new territory in the hands of patrons: private individuals who held titles to colonies in a quasi-feudal system. In 1626 the French minister, Cardinal Richelieu, approved of—and invested in—a company with plans to colonize Saint-Christophe, and he formed two other companies in 1627 with monopoly rights over foreign trade. The Company of the Islands of America (1635) organized the colonization of Martinique, Guadeloupe, and some other Caribbean islands. The English crown suffered financial constraints similar to those of the Dutch and French, and English investment proceeded under the auspices of men such as the Earl of Carlisle, who secured patents from the crown for rights to claim and settle islands. Private men and companies, not European governments, carried most of the risk for overseas enterprises in the first half of the century.

New settlements were characterized by their mixed economies and agricultural experimentation, an appropriate reflection of the Caribbean's incredibly varied ecosystems, with rainfall, soil, and topography varying dramatically from one island to another and even within a single island. Europeans hunted, planted, and plundered in the territory the French claimed on the northern coast of Hispaniola. Saint-Domingue, as the French called this colony, was not recognized by the Spanish until 1697 in the Treaty of Ryswick. Elsewhere, Europeans cultivated cotton, indigo, and tobacco in search of profitable and viable export crops before many islands switched to sugar cultivation. Island economies were always characterized by volatility; invasions and wars disrupted and destroyed plantations, as did the hurricanes and, in some places, volcanoes that defined the region. Life was unpredictable, mortality was high, newcomers were more likely to face early death than quick wealth, and in many places a frenzied pace reflected this awareness that life was likely to be all too short.

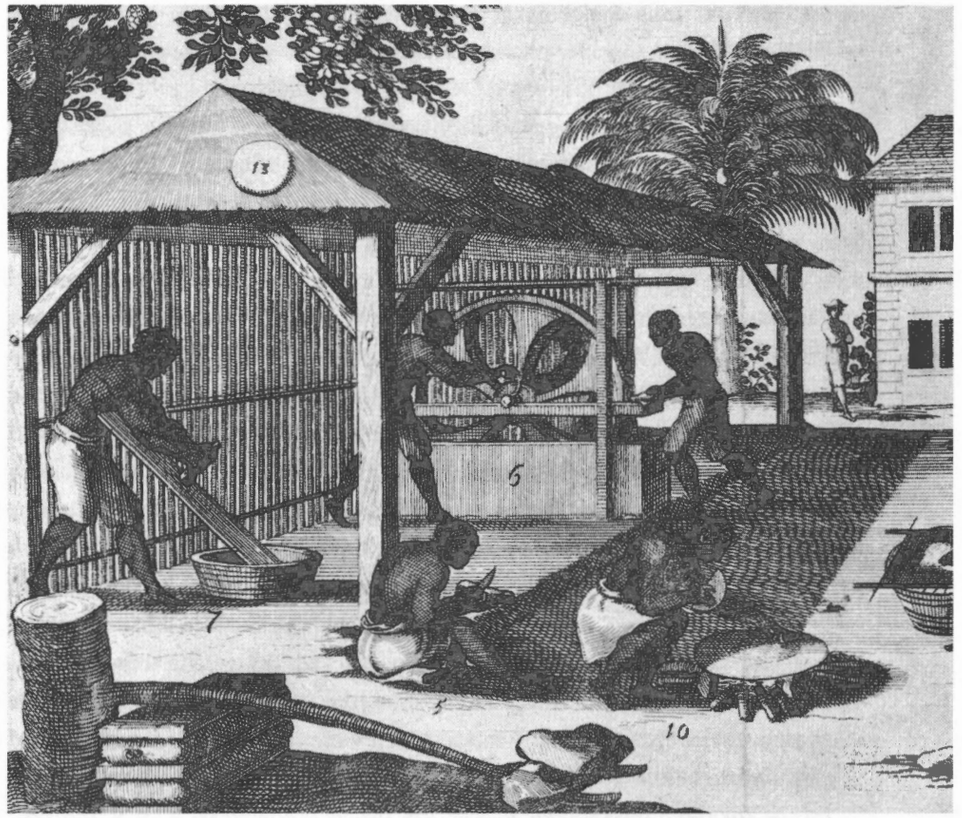


Figure 12.1 Slaves curing tobacco. Engraving from Jean Baptiste du Tertre, *Histoire generale des Antilles habitués par les François* (1667). Source: The John Carter Brown Library.

Given the economic aspirations of investors, it is no surprise that the majority of Europeans who ventured to the French and English islands in the Caribbean were bonded laborers—indentured servants (for the English) and engagés (for the French). Those who worked in French settlements generally served three-year contracts, while English servants labored under contracts lasting from four to seven years. In return for passage to the colonies, they sold their labor to the highest bid-

der, normally with no choice in the matter, and during their term of service they could be sold like livestock or passed down as part of an estate like any other movable good.

The abundant supply of servants kept their price low and perhaps contributed to their masters' brutality. "If the Masters be cruel," Englishman Richard Ligon recalled, "the Servants have very wearisome and miserable lives" (Ligon 1673, 44). Some of the worst cases made it to local courts. One servant in Barbados named John Baddam complained in 1640 to the island's council that he had been tortured by his two masters. They had hanged Baddam up by his hands and placed lit matches between his fingers. As a result, several of his joints no longer functioned, and he was at risk of losing his right hand. The council sided with Baddam, condemning what the councilors characterized as inhumane and un-Christian torture; it freed the abused servant immediately, arrested and fined his masters, and arranged for his medical care. Alexander Exquemelin, a French indentured servant on Tortuga in the 1660s, lamented the bad luck that had put him in the employment of "the wickedest rogue in the whole island." Deprived of adequate nutrition, Exquemelin endured "intense hunger" and sickness until finally his master sold him off to a new owner. As luck would have it, the new owner restored Exquemelin to health, provided him with food and clothing, and allowed him to buy himself on credit after one year's service (Exquemelin 1969, 34). Such were the quirks of fate that could shape a servant's life.

Escape for those who sought to flee was always hindered by their island residence, but desperate and enterprising men tried nonetheless. Tortuga and the rugged coast of Saint-Domingue proved to be favorite sanctuaries for escaped engagés. Those who could neither escape their servitude nor endure their treatment occasionally engaged in overt resistance. Barbados experienced one such plot in the 1640s. Servants there planned a massive uprising, intending to murder their masters, free themselves, and govern the colony. After the plot was revealed by a servant who had a change of heart, repression was brutal. Authorities executed 18 servants.

With freedom for those lucky enough to achieve it came the possibility of land and the promise of "freedom dues," which might range from a new shirt to farm implements that enabled the freeman to launch his own career. Freedom from service gave men the opportunity to establish themselves as independent farmers, laborers, or craftsmen in the agricultural economies of the region. Some servants completed their indenture without credit or resources sufficient to establish themselves, and signed on for another period of service for their masters. So Thomas Hubbard did in Barbados after he became free after five years of service in 1640; he agreed to work another year in return for 120 pounds of cotton, one hammock, and one pig. Some newly freed servants joined together in partnerships (called *matelotage* on the French islands and mateship among the English), sharing a single dwelling, working the land together, and dividing the profits. Matelotage was common in Saint-Domingue by mid-century. There, men spent part of the year hunting cattle, processing hides, and curing meat to trade at fairs on Tortuga, where they swapped their wares for tobacco, alcohol, and muskets (Lane 1998, 98). Barbados land deeds reflect similar patterns in the 1640s; in contrast to the hunting culture of Saint-Domingue, Barbados mates shared dwellings and combined forces to gain enough credit and capital to establish themselves as farmers.

These mateships point to some of the varied forms families took in the male-dominated islands. On Providence Island, an English colony inhabited almost exclusively in the 1630s by male laborers (English, Africans, and a few Native Americans from North America) and their masters, the governor, Philip Bell, was ordered by his employers in London to "distribute all the Inhabitants into several families whereof one shalbe the Chiefe." As the number of enslaved Africans grew on places such as Providence, family patterns altered to accommodate them. Worried about the possible threat posed by enslaved Africans in English households, the Providence Company ordered that each family should adhere to a ratio of two English for every African (Games 1999, 96–97).

As the Providence example suggests, enslaved Africans and Indians labored alongside European bondsmen. Ligon asserted that on Barbados enslaved Africans were treated better than indentured Europeans, but a close reading of his account reveals this comparison to have been shaped by his assumptions about the fragile nature of English bodies: slaves had less food, fewer clothes, and poorer shelter than did European servants. Barbados had no indigenous inhabitants when the English claimed the island for themselves, but by the 1650s some Indians worked there as slaves. On St. Eustatius, Dutch colonists adopted tobacco cultivation soon after conquering the island, but European laborers were not interested in working in the fields. The Dutch turned to Indian laborers, but those were also soon in short supply, so the Dutch then raided other islands and the mainland for slaves.

European and African populations in the Caribbean grew quickly, almost exclusively through migration rather than natural increase. If the numbers are often vague, two patterns are clear. First, the white population in the islands was predominantly young and male until the late 17th century. Second, the population came to be dominated by enslaved Africans by the end of the century, first on the English islands and then on the French. The population of the French islands was 19% black by 1650 but 36% by 1660 (Boucher 2008, 115). By 1655 the population of Barbados contained some 20,000 Africans and 23,000 Europeans; 18 years later, the slave population outnumbered the European population, 33,184 to 21,309 (Dunn 1973, 87). Enslaved Africans came from a variety of ethnic groups, as did Europeans—especially on the English and Dutch islands.

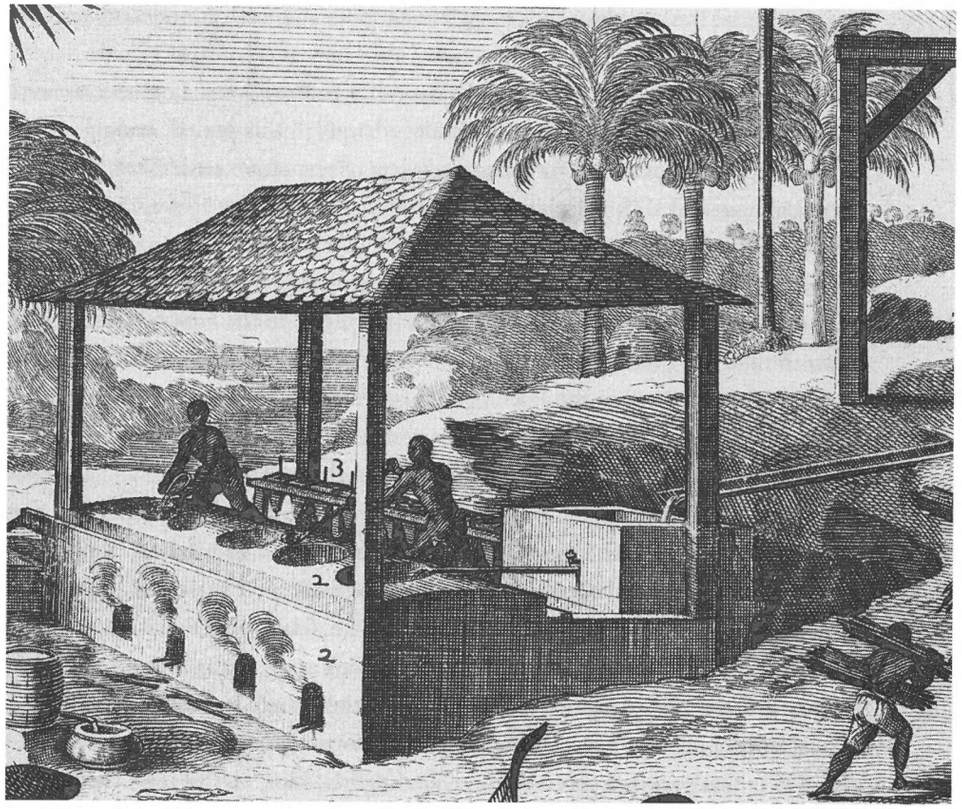
Although most European migrants traveled as indentured laborers, there were

some free migrants as well. Some were ambitious men eager to improve their economic condition: Tom Verney hoped in 1639 that his time in Barbados would "be an engagement for mee for my new lead-life," promising both prosperity and personal redemption for past failures (Games 1999, 80). Some were men of the cloth. The presence of Caribs on French-occupied islands not only hindered French settlement but also inspired the French to send Catholic missionaries to proselytize. Jews found haven in Suriname, Curaçao, Barbados, and Jamaica. English Catholics, forbidden to practice their faith openly at home and banned from holding public office, inhabited all of the English colonies in the Caribbean. French Huguenots made their way to the islands, too, where many governors tolerated their presence. If for many the 17th-century Caribbean was a place of violence, premature death, and avarice, for others the islands offered relative sanctuary—whether prompted by indifference or acceptance from neighbors—from some of the religious and political violence of the era.

European affairs continued to punctuate Caribbean life in the middle of the 17th century, defining mature colonial settlements just as they had facilitated their creation. Other regions of the Atlantic also began to shape the Caribbean. Trading ties thickened connections to the American mainland, Europe, and Africa. One overpopulated Caribbean colony, Barbados, even spawned a supply colony on the American mainland, Carolina. Africans became a larger presence in the region, dominating some islands and posing strategic challenges and opportunities for residents and invaders. Several regional transitions illustrate these new intersections.

The first transition involved sugar, another commodity of growing popularity in Europe. Tobacco may have sparked interest in Caribbean land in the 1620s, but sugar wrought an even greater frenzy. It took hold gradually in the English and especially the French Caribbean, primarily because sugarcane cultivation and processing required a large capital investment in equipment and labor, one well beyond the reach of most European planters, many of whom also lacked expertise in processing cane. In 1654 came a crucial turning point in the Caribbean, sparked by events outside the region: the Dutch, after nine years of struggle with the Portuguese, finally abandoned Brazil, where they had learned the complicated and costly techniques of sugar cultivation and, more important, of transforming sugar into rum and molasses. As Dutch merchants, planters, and investors dispersed into the Caribbean, they brought those techniques with them. While some English settlers had already begun to experiment with sugar on Barbados, the infusion of Dutch capital contributed to the "sugar revolution," in which sugar monoculture replaced other crops and enslaved Africans replaced European indentured laborers.

Sugar wrought major environmental transformations wherever it took hold, and those changes assisted the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, which had crossed the Atlantic from Africa in slaving vessels. As Europeans cleared land for sugarcane, they felled



trees, removing bird habitats and facilitating the survival of insects the birds had once consumed. Sugar processing also required clay pots, which stood empty much of the year, collecting rainwater that enabled mosquitoes to flourish. *A. aegypti* is the vector for yellow fever, and it is no accident that the Caribbean's first yellow fever epidemic started in Barbados in 1647, in the wake of sugar's introduction to the island. In that first epidemic, as much as one-third of the island's population may have died.

Figure 12.2 Pots used for processing sugar, which also bred mosquitoes. Engraving from Jean Baptiste du Tertre, *Histoire generale des Antilles habitées par les François* (1667). Source: The John Carter Brown Library.

Yellow fever also undermined the siege tactics of European armies in the Caribbean after 1650. Here the attackers died in high numbers and the defenders won the day, a trend that made it almost impossible for the Spanish to reclaim their Caribbean islands, or for other attackers to displace rivals. The explanation for this failure of long-standing European military practice lay in a complex combination of factors all shaped by the Atlantic context of the region: heightened European demand for sugar, the *A. aegypti* mosquito, the

environmental transformation of sugar plantations, and fresh European blood for the mosquito to consume (McNeill 2004).

A second turning point in the Caribbean came in 1655, when English conquest made Jamaica the last major island to change hands in this period, ending an era of frontier settlement and introducing a new era of plantation settlement. The conquest also revealed shifting relations between England, on the rise in the Western Hemisphere, and the Dutch. In 1667 the Dutch had conquered Suriname, but this turned out to be what the historian Wim Klooster characterizes as "the last convulsions of Dutch Atlantic ambitions" (Klooster 1997, 58). In the end the Dutch were left with their six Caribbean islands.

What had happened to the Dutch? They had made themselves indispensable—and wealthy—through the carrying trade, which was especially vital in the French (and to a lesser extent the English) islands. But both the French and English began to exert more control over their island colonies in the 1650s and especially the 1660s—surveying the land, requiring censuses of island inhabitants and property, and taking direct control of colonial governance. The French chartered a new company in 1664, the Compagnie des Indes occidentals françaises (French West India Company), which assumed responsibility for adjudicating affairs in the Caribbean. Seeking greater control over colonial trade, both the French and the English moved against the dominance of Dutch shipping. In 1651 and 1660 the English passed navigation acts that required goods to travel on English ships, and in 1664 the French crown banned trade with the Dutch, despite fervent colonial opposition.

Although these laws dislodged the Dutch from the official carrying trade with these islands, illegal trade continued to flourish. More important, in 1662 the Dutch secured a new asiento, or trading contract, from the Spanish crown that gave them license to trade slaves in Spanish America—a trade made easier for them by the growing number of trading posts in Africa and an enterprise that signaled the tightening of connections between the Caribbean, Africa, and the American mainland. The Spanish colonies of Santo Domingo and Puerto Rico were increasingly important in this trade, and Curaçao (and later St. Eustatius) emerged as its lucrative center. Despite formal trade prohibitions, the Dutch also supplied the French colonies of Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Saint-Domingue. Thus the Dutch continued to generate great wealth through legal and extralegal commerce and especially the slave trade.

Shifting European politics and economies in the early 17th century had also precipitated important transformations for the Caribs of the Lesser Antilles, who had long traded with Europeans passing through the region. Their trade goods were so well known that when Sir Henry Colt traveled through the Caribbean in 1631, he was especially eager to purchase a hammock at Dominica, where the "people are thought to have the best" (Harlow 1924, 77). But Caribs were unprepared for

the permanent occupations envisioned by Europeans in the 1620s. The English and French on St. Christopher learned this lesson soon after their arrival in 1625, when they were surrounded by a fleet comprised of some 400 or 500 Caribs. "We bade them be gone," remembered Captain John Smith, "but they would not," and so a battle ensued (Harlow 1924, xix). Carib threats forced the Europeans to post a constant guard for almost a year, and other efforts to settle and occupy the land came to a temporary halt.

As Europeans flooded the region, islands quickly became overpopulated in terms of the arable land and economic opportunities available, resulting in new diasporas with their own consequences for Caribs. After 1628, English tobacco farmers claimed the unoccupied islands of Nevis, Montserrat, and Antigua, and were opposed in their efforts by the Caribs, who were more successful in preventing English settlement at Barbuda after 1632. Further dispersals in the 1630s, 1640s, and 1650s by the Dutch, French, and English to the Windward Islands of Tobago (where the Caribs destroyed an English settlement in 1639), Grenada, St. Lucia, Marie Galante, and St. Martin met with continued resistance. Overt war between the French and Caribs erupted in 1654 and lasted for five years. The wars brought the French and English into alliance in 1659, and by 1660 the region was at peace. In that year, a settlement restricted Caribs to St. Vincent and Dominica and ended their protracted wars of resistance against European incursions.

Finally, the Caribbean continued to be embroiled in the numerous European conflicts of this period. The Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 put a temporary end to the hostilities that had consumed Europe for the first half of the century, but soon two former allies, the English and the Dutch, launched a series of three wars (1652–54, 1665–67, and 1672–74). In the second of these wars the French were involved as allies of the Dutch, though from 1672 to 1678 the French and Dutch fought each other in the Indies. In the context of these European conflicts, the three nations frequently attacked the Caribbean holdings of their rivals.

But these wars were never simple extensions of European conflicts, because of the complex assortment of people who had come to inhabit the Caribbean by the 1660s—free and unfree, European, African, Indian, Protestant, and Catholic. Caribs continued to affect colonial affairs just as they had shaped initial settlements. Samuel Winthrop, an English colonist on Antigua, described the French attack that took place there in October of 1666. The French, accompanied by their Carib allies, burned property and killed residents as they worked their way across the island until the English finally sought peace. The English feared the Caribs—scorned by Winthrop as the "cruell Indian"—more than the French, and Winthrop alleged that after the French departed, the Caribs stayed behind, raping and murdering for five days and claiming, Winthrop reported indignantly, "liberty to do soe" (Winthrop [1667], 355–57).

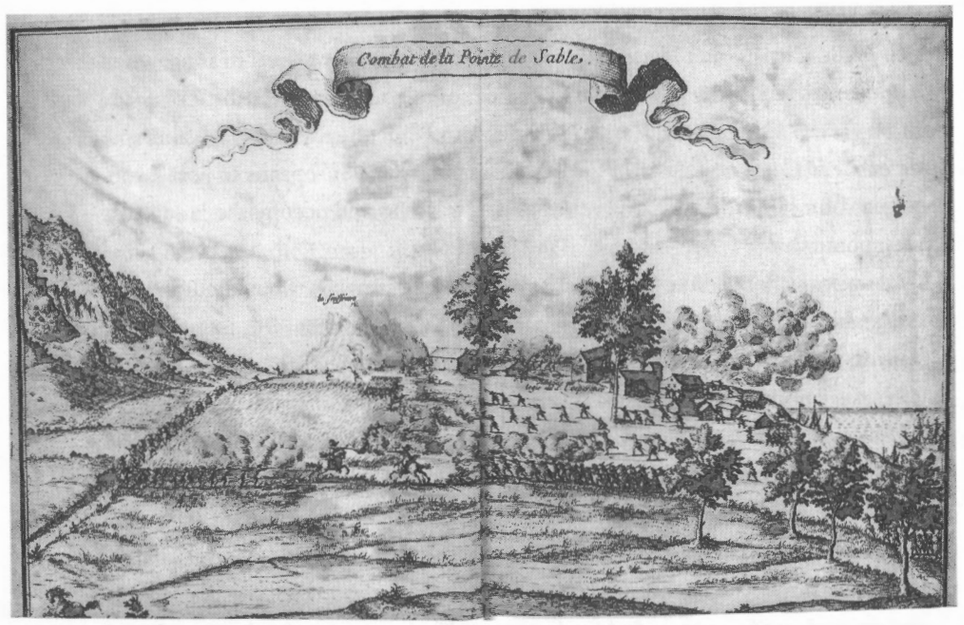


Figure 12.3 Warfare between the French and the English on St. Christopher. Engraving from Jean Baptiste du Tertre, *Histoire generale des Antilles habitées par les François* (1667). Source: The John Carter Brown Library.

Divided loyalties characterized warfare in the region, often to the benefit of invaders. Indentured servants and slaves sometimes allied themselves with intruders. When the French attacked the English island of Montserrat, for example, they found the Irish Catholic indentured servants who were the majority of the island's population—and whose kingdom had suffered terribly under English rule—eager to assist them, and the French were victorious (Akenson 1997, 85–86). Attackers came to rely on assistance from discontented laborers. When the Spanish attacked Providence in 1640, they loitered offshore in their ships, hoping to get news of island conditions from the runaway servants and slaves who had fled the island in boats and canoes. Wars also provided opportunities for unfree laborers to escape, as Winthrop's slaves did in 1666 while the French seized his home and property. The laborers whose toil generated profits for European planters and investors posed daily threats to the survival of those enterprises, and European wars vividly exposed that tension.

The transformation of the Caribbean between 1620 and the 1660s was remarkable. Islands that had long been abandoned by the Spanish were claimed and settled by Dutch, French, and English settlers in an age of diminishing Spanish power and transformed European geopolitics. These European invaders displaced Caribs, and confined them to only two islands. Forced African migrants joined Europeans in

ever larger numbers. Tobacco and sugar generated wealth for investors and pleasure for distant consumers. Northern Europeans planted themselves around the Caribbean in an outgrowth of European conflicts, while European and, increasingly, African and American events continued to shape the region, embedding it in dense webs of connection to the world beyond.

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