

## The Canary Islands as an Area of Interconnectivity between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic (Fourteenth-Sixteenth Centuries)

**Abstract.** This paper examines the role played by the Canary Islands as an area of interconnectivity between the Mediterranean and the middle Atlantic. It focuses on the period between the first European voyages to the archipelago in the fourteenth century and the early decades of the sixteenth century, when the islands' economy was in full swing and perfectly integrated into the economic system that united first the trading circuits of Europe and West Africa, and later the New World. The paper specifically analyses the economic role of the islands by looking above all at the development of two activities that were at the heart of the Atlantic trade revolution; the slave trade and the production and transportation of sugar.

On September 30<sup>th</sup> 1537, Queen Joanna of Castile presented Gabriel Socarrats, a Catalan merchant based in the Canary Islands since the early sixteenth century, with new capitulations for the conquest and colonization of Saint Brendan's Isle. After centuries of unsuccessful attempts to locate an island that since the mid fifteenth century was believed to lie somewhere to the west of the Canary Islands, and following Francisco Fernandez de Lugo's attempt in 1517, and another similar expedition in 1526 under the command of Fernando Álvarez and Fernando de Troya, Socarrats became the leader of a new voyage of discovery. He had become convinced of this trip's chances of success after his navigation officer, Antonio de Fonseca, had claimed to have spotted this fantastic island between La Palma and La Hispaniola, in the Caribbean Sea.<sup>1</sup>

The queen gave Gabriel Socarrats the right to take "two vessels equipped with a crew and weapons, and provisions and all kinds of cattle, with an experienced navigator" to guarantee the success of the discovery and colonization.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The search for the imaginary Saint Brendan's Island, also known as *San Borondón* or Lost Island, was based on a myth that dated back to the legend of Saint Brendan, a sixth-century Irish monk who set out, along with fourteen other monks, on a journey that would take them, after seven years, to the island where the Garden of Eden was. Once Europeans began sailing down the coast of Africa, the myth was shifted to the middle Atlantic, somewhere near the Canary Islands.

Additionally and in accordance with the Canarian and American experiences, if Socarrats and his men found natives, Queen Joanna ordered him to bring them “into the service of God our Lord, and ours, and that they give obedience and vassalage to us as their kings and natural lords”.<sup>3</sup> Gabriel could take “to this island (...) tools for making bread, and wine, and sugar on it, and cattle and other fruits”, as well as “all kinds of seeds, plants and legumes and trees, and cattle, and wheat, and barley, to begin cultivating them”.<sup>4</sup> If the enterprise was successful, Socarrats might be rewarded, in return, with the titles of governor, *capitán general* and *alguacil mayor* of the new lands, as well as with possessions, rents, vassals and slaves.<sup>5</sup>

The legend of Saint Brendan gained credence during the maritime expansion that began in the mid-fourteenth century with the *rediscovery* of the Canary Islands. From that time onwards, individual and collective enterprises converged in a race in which European sailors, traders and explorers discovered the coastline of West Africa, and the early Atlantic slave trade began to have an impact on South-western Europe. It also took them beyond the very frontiers of geographical knowledge, which were finally breached in the years following the first expedition to the West Indies.

During the first century of European expansion, the area between the Gulf of Guinea, the Atlantic islands and the southern Iberian Peninsula became a space linked culturally and economically to the Mediterranean Sea and to Northern European traders. Portuguese, Genoese, Florentines, Castilians, Catalans, Flemish, Germans, North-Africans, Berbers, Sephardi Jews and sub-Saharan Africans cohabited, conversed and communicated using a syncretic language of trade, but also their own respective languages: Portuguese, Ligurian, Tuscan, Castilian, Catalan, Flemish, German, Arabic, Berber, Hebrew, Wolof, Fulani, Temne, Bambara and Mandingo. Management of the hinterland remained in the hands of local potentates, Muslim *qajids*, *alformas* and *linguas*

2 (...) *dos navíos basteados de gente y armas, y mantenimientos y ganados de todas suertes, con piloto suficiente (...)*; Archivo General de Indias (AGI), Indiferente, 415, L.1, 1537, September, 30<sup>th</sup>, f. 222r-232r; “Capitulación con Gabriel de Socarrás”.

3 (...) *al serviço de Dios nuestro señor, e nuestro, e que nos den la obediencia y vasallaje que nos deven como a reyes y señores naturales (...)*; *ibid.*

4 (...) *en la dicha yslla (...) aparejo para labrar en ella pan, e vino, e açúcares, e ganado y otros frutos (...) todas semillas, plantas y legumbres y arboledas de provecho, y ganados, y trigo, y çevada, para la poner en cultura; ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*; see also Maria Emelina Martín Acosta, *Capitulación de Gabriel de Socarrás para la conquista de la Isla de San Bernardo (San Brandán o San Borondón)*, in: *Revista de Historia Canaria* 178 (1996), 129–150; Luis Regueira Benitez and Manuel Poggio Capote, *Una expedición de Melchor de Lugo para descubrir la isla de San Borondón (1570)*, in: *Anuario de Estudios Atlánticos* 53 (2007), 99–166, here 110.

or agents and interpreters who, depending on the places where they met, were Europeans, Arab-Berbers or sub-Saharan. The logic of the Euro-African and inter-African trade that took place in the middle Atlantic extended the medieval Mediterranean and trans-Saharan trading circuits. It was based on the experience accumulated during the Late Middle Ages and it used pre-existing or slightly modified trading and naval technologies as demanded by the new economic reality that emerged in the ocean waters.<sup>6</sup>

In this context, the Canary Islands played a decisive role due to their geographical location, halfway along the route to Guinea and in an advantageous position for the transatlantic routes to the Caribbean.

The aim of this paper, then, is to examine the role played by the Canary Islands as an area of interconnectivity between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. I shall focus, basically, on the period between the first European voyages to the archipelago—in the fourteenth century—and the early decades of the sixteenth century, when the islands' economy was in full swing and perfectly integrated into the economic system that united the trading circuits of Europe and West Africa, first, and the New World, later.

I shall begin with a brief summary of the process of rediscovery, conquest and colonization of the archipelago, a process that took place between the beginning of the fourteenth and the end of the fifteenth centuries, and which culminated in the incorporation of all the islands into the Crown of Castile. Then I shall analyse the economic role of the islands by looking, above all, at the development of two activities that were at the heart of the Atlantic trade revolution: the slave trade and the production and exportation of sugar.

## Rediscovering the Canary Islands

From the earliest days of European expansion in the middle Atlantic, the Canary Islands were coveted due to their geographical location. The islands were a halfway point on the voyage to the Gulf of Guinea and an almost certain stopping-off point on voyages to the New World. Moreover, due to their proximity to the coast of Africa, the Canaries were also an exceptional operating base from which to launch plundering expeditions on the shores of Mauritania. However, the archipelago was also desirable for its soils and climate, ideal for

6 António de Almeida Mendes, *Le premier Atlantique entre deux Méditerranées : comment les Africains ont développé le Vieux Monde (XV<sup>e</sup>-XVI<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, in: *Les esclavages en Méditerranée. Espaces et dynamiques économiques*, ed. Fabienne Guillén and Salah Trabelsi, Madrid 2012, 151–170, here 155–156.

the intensive and extensive cultivation of sugarcane, much appreciated on the European trading circuits.

Generally speaking, the colonization of the Canary Islands has to be placed within the process of European expansion in the Late Middle Ages. It basically corresponds to the period of economic stagnation recorded from the late thirteenth century onwards, followed by a period of equilibrium and then the upturn towards a clearly positive growth curve in the middle of the fifteenth century.

The colonization of the archipelago took two forms closely related to these periods of contraction, equilibrium and expansion. The first of these saw the creation of trading enclaves and the establishment of protectorates and areas of political influence. It was a way of adopting practices widely used in the Mediterranean in the Late Middle Ages, in which the aim was to try to influence the existing structures in the places occupied without actually replacing them. The second form, much used during European expansion in the Atlantic, especially in the African archipelagos and the Americas, was an authentic colonization that was intended to transform the pre-existing reality.

Accepting this pattern for the Canary Islands, we can distinguish two stages in the process of European occupation of the archipelago.

In the first, which we might define as penetration or pre-colonization typical of the fourteenth century, European expansion was restricted to influencing the indigenous structures for the purpose of favouring, through trade and evangelization, European interests.

This first period witnessed the well-known voyage by the Florentine Angiolino del Teggia dei Corbizzi and the Genoese Niccoloso da Recco, in 1341, financed by Alfonso IV of Portugal and recounted by Giovanni Boccaccio in *De Canaria*.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, there was an expedition commanded by the Genoese Lancelotto Malocello at the beginning of the fourteenth century<sup>8</sup> and the Catalan-Aragonese expeditions that set sail from Mallorca in 1342 and 1352, which

<sup>7</sup> It consists of a brief text only two pages long, written between 1342 and 1344, and later incorporated into the *Zibaldone Magliabechiano*, which can be considered “the first descriptive model of all pre-Columbian and Columbian accounts of voyages and discoveries (el primer modelo descriptivo de todas las relaciones de viajes y descubrimientos precolombinos y colombinos)”; Marcos Martínez, Boccaccio y su entorno en relación a las Islas Canarias, in: *Cuadernos de Filología latina*, n° extraordinario (2001), 95–118, here 103–104.

<sup>8</sup> Martínez, Boccaccio (cf. n. 7), 99–100; David Abulafia, *The Discovery of Mankind. Atlantic Encounters in the Age of Columbus*, New Haven 2008, 36. Also prior to da Recco's and Corbizzi's trip, Angelino Dulcert's 1339 portolan chart showed three of the Canary Islands—Lanzarote, with the coat of arms of Genoa in allusion to Malocello's expedition, Fuerteventura and an annexed islet—and placed the rest of the adjacent islands within

founded the diocese of Fortuna-Telde and brought Guanche slaves back to Europe for the first time.<sup>9</sup> This early phase maybe also includes the voyage commanded by Jaume Ferrer in 1346, which reached the Gold River,<sup>10</sup> as shown on Abraham Cresques' *Catalan Atlas* (1375),<sup>11</sup> and the first Castilian expeditions to the islands.<sup>12</sup>

the field of fantasy and mythology: San Brendan, Primaria, Capraria and Canaria—Eliás Serra Ráfols, Los mallorquines en Canarias, in: *Revista de Historia* 54 (1941), 195–209, here 197; Francisco Morales Padrón, Los descubrimientos en los siglos XIV y XV y los archipiélagos atlánticos, in: *Anuario de Estudios Atlánticos* 17 (1971), 429–465, here 429, 431 and 433; Eduardo Aznar Vallejo, Conquistar y colonizar en las regiones meridionales, in: *Le Canarien. Retrato de dos mundos*, ed. Eduardo Aznar, Dolores Corbella, Berta Pico et al., La Laguna 2006, vol. 2, 63–88, here 65. Apparently, one of the oldest references to the Canary Islands is in book VI of Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia*, transmitted, centuries later, by Isidore of Seville and some Muslim authors who pointed to the existence of the Fortunate Islands or *al-Kalidāt*, and stressed the extreme difficulty of conducting a successful conquest due to the resistance of their inhabitants; Abulafia, *Discovery of Mankind* (cf. n. 8), 34–35.

<sup>9</sup> Francisco Sevillano Colom, Mallorca y Canarias, in: *Hispania* 32 (1972), 123–148; Morales, Los descubrimientos (cf. n. 8); Serra Ráfols, Los mallorquines (cf. n. 8); Antonio Rumeu de Armas, *El obispado de Telde. Misioneros mallorquines y catalanes en el Atlántico*, Madrid 1960, 33–34; see, also, Abulafia, *Discovery of Mankind* (cf. n. 8); 66–67.

<sup>10</sup> Fourteenth-century Majorcan maps speculated that the Gold River, located south of the Canary Islands and probably confused with the Niger River, would lead to the market of Timbuktu, suggesting that access to the African gold trade was already a target. For an analysis of the way Africa was shown on late medieval Majorcan charts, see Yoro K. Fall, *L'Afrique à la naissance de la cartographie moderne (14<sup>ème</sup>/15<sup>ème</sup> siècles): les cartes majorquines*, Paris 1982 and Ramon J. Pujades i Bataller, *Les cartes portolanes. La representació medieval d'una mar solcada*, Barcelona 2007.

<sup>11</sup> “The sailor Jaume Ferrer sailed to the Gold River on Saint Lawrence's day, 10 August, in the year 1346 (*Partich l'uxer d'en Jacme Ferrer per anar al Riu de l'Or al gorn de Sen Lorenc, qui és a ·X· d'agost, qui fo en l'any ·M·CCCXLVI*)”: *El Atlas Catalán de Cresques Abraham. El primer atlas del mundo*, ed. Jaume Matas Tort, Barcelona 1975, 3, 98–99. Mecità de Viladestes' planisphere (1413) reproduces, with some differences, the same text and drawing as the *Catalan Atlas*, see Fall, *L'Afrique* (cf. n. 10), 153–155. A Latin manuscript preserved in Genoa also sheds some light on this expedition with a brief commentary which states that the Catalan Jaume Ferrer had left the city of Mallorca looking for the Gold River, and no one knew what had become of him; Rumeu, *Obispado de Telde* (cf. n. 9), 35–36.

<sup>12</sup> In 1377, 1382, 1385, 1391 and 1393 respectively, even though the 1382 voyage, commanded by Francisco López who left Sanlúcar de Barrameda heading for Galicia, was not supposed to reach Gran Canaria: *Crónicas de los reyes de Castilla don Pedro, don Enrique II, don Juan I, don Enrique III, por d. Pedro López de Ayala*, ed. Jerónimo Zurita y Castro, Madrid 1780, vol. 2, 493; Morales, Los descubrimientos (cf. n. 8), 437–439; Bailey W. Diffie and George D. Winus, *Foundations of the Portuguese Empire, 1415–1580*, Minne-

During the second stage, which covered the entire fifteenth century and may be defined as the true colonization stage, the fundamental goal was the creation of stable structures, either by importing new elements or transforming pre-existing ones. Necessary preconditions for all of this were the exercise of military control, political and administrative organization, the reshaping of the native population and its social structure, and the reorganization of economic activities. The establishment of these three vectors, namely the politico-military, the demographic and the economic, had to be adapted to the peculiarities of the different islands and, to a greater extent, to the two fundamental phases of the conquest of the Canaries: the seigniorial one, carried out by private individuals up to 1475, and the royal one, organized by the Crown of Castile from shortly before 1480 to the end of the century.<sup>13</sup>

I shall not give a full account here of the events that took place between Bethencourt and La Salle's Franco-Norman expedition of 1402, when the full colonization of the islands began,<sup>14</sup> and the conquest of Tenerife in 1496, when the Crown of Castile gained effective control over the archipelago. However, before coming to the second part of this article, I would like to suggest an idea which might help to explain the structures of the early Canary Islands economy and its close relationship with Mediterranean trading practices: every war has its financial cost. In the case of the Canaries, especially during the conquests of Gran Canaria (1483), La Palma (1493) and Tenerife (1496), this cost was rather high, but it was always made up for by the financial returns that the islands could offer to investors and entrepreneurs.

sota 1977, 42–44; Miguel Ángel Ladero Quesada, Jean de Béthencourt, Sevilla y Enrique III, in: *Le Canarien* (cf. n. 8), vol. 2, 17–49, 32–33.

<sup>13</sup> See, for the two stages of the process of European occupation of the archipelago, Eduardo Aznar Vallejo, *La colonización de las Islas Canarias en el siglo XV*, in: *En la España Medieval* 8 (1986), 195–217, here 195–197.

<sup>14</sup> We owe our knowledge of the Franco-Norman expedition—the first attempt at systematic colonization carried out in the middle Atlantic—to the two different manuscripts of *Le Canarien* that have survived, in which the conquests of Lanzarote (1402), Fuerteventura and El Hierro (1405) are narrated. For the two different accounts of *Le Canarien* see *Le Canarien* (cf. n. 8), vol. 1 which includes an exhaustive edition of manuscripts G, or codex Egerton, and B, or codex Montruffet, with facsimile reproduction, transcription, Castilian translation and study of the two texts. Among the abundant bibliography, a good choice is again *Le Canarien* (cf. n. 8), vol. 2 with a large number of contributions analysing the military conquest, and contact with the human and natural world of the islands.

## Trafficking with Slaves...

The conquest of the archipelago and its complete annexation to the Crown of Castile were accompanied by different ways of organizing the territory economically. These ways were not necessarily planned, but they were perfectly adapted to the different stages of colonization and the financial tensions that arose at the end of the conquest. All in all, they were a logical extension of the activities carried out in the Mediterranean over the preceding centuries.

Indeed, the strategy implemented by Castile during the military conquest of the Canary Islands was essentially a territorial extension of medieval border warfare. Control of each island was preceded by a fairly lengthy period of sporadic attacks and pillaging in search of booty, both material and human. And so it remained until the end of the fifteenth century, when a huge number of the natives of Gran Canaria, La Palma and Tenerife were enslaved.

On Tenerife, for example, once the conquest was complete and despite the fact that the natives had been considered a peaceful people after their surrender, Alonso Fernández de Lugo, the first *adelantado* of the Canaries, a title equivalent to that of governor, allowed them to be enslaved, probably in order to repay the huge debts he had run up with his creditors to finance the military campaigns.<sup>15</sup> Obviously, this way of doing things was not invented by the Castilians. In 1229 and 1287, during the conquests of Mallorca and Menorca respectively, similar methods had to be used.<sup>16</sup> In any case, the profits from the sale of Canary Island natives ended up in the pockets of those who had lent money to Alonso de Lugo, until the establishment of the sugar industry as a means of obtaining additional funds put an end to the mass enslavements in the early sixteenth century.<sup>17</sup>

Due to their proximity to the coast of Mauritania, the Canary Islands were also an ideal place for prolonging the medieval concept of border warfare, deeply rooted among the new Christian settlers, and for attempting to gain access to trans-Saharan trade. Therefore, besides the islands themselves, the Canaries' African frontier became an important source of supply of North Afri-

15 See for La Palma's case Manuela Marrero Rodríguez, *La esclavitud en Tenerife a raíz de la conquista*, La Laguna 1966, 40–41.

16 See, for example, Gabriel Jover Avellà, Antoni Mas i Forners and Ramon Soto i Company, El primer tràfic esclavista a Mallorca, in: *L'avenç* 35 (1980), 60–65; Ramon Soto i Company, Colonització feudal i esclavitud, Mallorca 1230–1350, in: *Recerques* 52/53 (2006), 19–48; idem, La situació dels andalusins (musulmans i batejats) a Mallorca després de la conquesta catalana de 1230, in: *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez. Antiquité – Moyen Âge* 30/1 (1994), 167–206.

17 Marrero Rodríguez, *Esclavitud en Tenerife* (cf. n. 15), 24–25 and 28–33.

can and sub-Saharan slaves. It quickly became the ideal place for organizing cavalry raids, generally from Tenerife or Gran Canaria, under the legal guise of trading companies, and for subsequently establishing ransoming companies with the aim of negotiating the liberation of the highest-ranking Muslim prisoners.<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, in a context determined by the rivalry between Castile and Portugal for the control of the middle Atlantic and access to African markets, Castilian interest in trying to exercise relatively stable control over the Mauritanian coastline was responsible for the foundation of Santa Cruz de la Mar Pequeña, a small fortress erected by Diego García de Herrera in 1476 or 1478 that survived until about 1535. Its chief function was to challenge Portugal with regard to control of the trans-Saharan routes and to compete directly with the Portuguese fortress-factory of Arguin, likewise situated in Mauritania.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Expeditions to the Maghreb took the form of companies and societies that generally lasted no more than two trips and made high profits. The first investment, usually carried out by members of the insular oligarchy, served to fit out a ship and hire a crew to guarantee the success of the action: sailors, captains, infantrymen, horsemen and guides who knew the terrain. Ransoms also took the form of companies, usually formed by two individuals who were in charge of fitting out a boat, providing it with a crew and recruiting the Moriscos guides who were in charge of negotiating with the local authorities. Usually, slave owners who ceded their Muslim slaves to negotiate their ransom obtained, in exchange, two black slaves for each Sarasin, while the rest of the booty, both material and human, went to the partners who assumed the risks deriving from the weather, corsair attacks and the natural death or escape of slaves; see Marrero Rodríguez, *Esclavitud en Tenerife* (cf. n. 15), 47–48; Manuel Lobo Cabrera, *Rescates canarios en la costa de Berbería*, in: *Actas del Coloquio Relaciones de la península Ibérica con el Magreb (siglos XIII–XVI)*, ed. Mercedes García-Arenal and María Jesús Viguera Molins, Madrid 1988, 591–620, here 592; idem, *Ideología y praxis en la proyección canaria hacia África occidental*, in: *Colóquio Internacional Sobre as razões que levaram a Península Ibérica a iniciar no século XV a expansão mundial*, Lisbon 1983, 1–24, here 5–7.

<sup>19</sup> Built around 1440 on a small rocky island (Abulafia, *Discovery of Mankind* (cf. n. 8), 90), Arguin was an active market where Portuguese, Maghrebi and Berber merchants converged. From the late fifteenth century to 1535 more than 25,000 slaves were shipped from Arguin to the Iberian Peninsula (Ivana Elbl, *The Volume of the Early Atlantic Slave Trade*, in: *The Journal of African History* 38 (1997), 31–75, here 43–44; António de Almeida Mendes, *Portugal e o tráfico de escravos na primeira metade do século XVI*, in: *Africana Studia* 7 (2004), 13–30, here 19–20). Roughly during the same period, the factory received between 20 and 25 kilograms of sub-Saharan gold from the goldfields of Bambuk and Bouré (Boubacar Barry, *L'évolution économique, politique et sociale de la Sénégambie pendant l'ère portugaise, au XV<sup>e</sup> et XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles*, in: *Colóquio Internacional sobre as razões que levaram a Península Ibérica a iniciar no século XV a expansão mundial*, Lisbon 1983, 3). By the mid-1520s, the shipment of slaves had reached the figure of 2,000 men and women per year. After that, several geopolitical factors – the Sharifian attacks on Agadir, Safi, Azamor, Aguer and Arzila as well as Canary Island piracy – caused



The cavalry raids and the ransoming companies became an important way of obtaining slaves, cattle, gold, amber and other African commodities. Nevertheless, the slave population of the Canaries was not only supplied from the raids and the ransoming of Berbers. Portuguese traders put in there on their way back to Lisbon and placed slaves in a market with a high demand for them, substantially stimulated by the sugar industry, without doubt the most important economic mainstay of the islands, as we shall see. Both the legal and the illegal version of the slave trade grew in the Cape Verde Islands and on the coast of Guinea and its main river deltas.<sup>20</sup>

From 1478 onwards, royal licenses for doing business in Cape Verde began to proliferate, a form of enterprise that would last throughout the sixteenth century<sup>21</sup> and would supply slaves not only to the Canaries but also to some cities in the Iberian Peninsula, such as Seville, Cadiz, Valencia and Barcelona, and the Castilian possessions in the Americas.<sup>22</sup>

annual shipments to fall sharply. From the 1540s onwards, smuggling and the shift in Portuguese trade to the mouths of the Senegal and Gambia rivers finally ruined Arguin. From then on, Santiago in Cape Verde took over as the Portuguese centre for the slave trade in the region (de Almeida, Portugal (cf. n. 19), 28; Barry, L'évolution économique (cf. n. 19), 3).

<sup>20</sup> In the legal version, a factor worked according to the orders given by the capitalists based in the Canary Islands, receiving a commission of as much as 33% of the profits. In the illegal one the negotiations fell to an agent who carried his own commodities to swap peacefully for slaves, and who also received orders from different people for the same purpose, obtaining a commission of 6%; Lobo Cabrera, *Ideología* (cf. n. 18), 13–14.

<sup>21</sup> Manuel Lobo Cabrera, *Gran Canaria y los contactos con las islas portuguesas atlánticas: Azores, Madera, Cabo Verde y Santo Tomé*, in: *Coloquio de Historia Canario-Americana / Coloquio Internacional de Historia Marítima* (1982), Las Palmas 1985, vol. 4, 311–333, here 324–325; see *ibid.*, 326–330, for different examples of Canary trading companies in Cape Verde.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 331; de Almeida, Portugal (cf. n. 19), 26. In addition to the 122,000 black slaves who were shipped to the Americas according to the licenses granted by the authorities from 1505 to 1596 (cf. Vicenta Cortés Alonso, *La mano de obra negra en el Virreinato* (siglo XVI), in: *Revista de la Universidad Complutense de Madrid* 117 (1980), 489–502), a large number of them arrived in the New World fraudulently. Ruses to avoid the payment of charges and fees were widespread. From ships going to Cape Verde with the alleged intention of returning to the Canary Islands, to captains that were transporting more slaves than they declared, including the *recruitment* of black slaves as cabin boys, all of these were common practices by those who left Castilian possessions bound for ports in Cape Verde, Guinea and São Tomé, with the intention of setting sail for the Caribbean without paying taxes and fees; see for that question Manuel Lobo Cabrera, *Eslavos negros a Indias a través de Gran Canaria*, in: *Revista de Indias* 45/175 (1985), 27–50.

However, sending ships illegally to the coast of Guinea held even greater appeal, first, because of the lower cost of the preparations in relation to attacks on the Maghreb, since it was not necessary to mobilize cavalry, ground artillery or infantry; and in addition, the profits to be made could reach close to three hundred per cent of the capital invested.<sup>23</sup> This was the reason why Canary Islands companies also had Flemish, Italian, French and even Portuguese stockholders; and secondly because the risks were smaller and were limited to problems with the weather, such as periods of calm or storms, and especially to the danger of encountering English and French corsairs or Portuguese surveillance ships. This last reason explains why, on numerous occasions, crews included expert navigators, usually from Portugal, as well as African guides to handle negotiations with native traders.<sup>24</sup>

Be that as it may, it cannot be questioned that for a century and a half the Canary Islands were able to sidestep the Portuguese slave trafficking monopoly by means of the old late medieval cavalry raids and the slave trade in Guinea and Cape Verde, especially the illegal one. Thanks to this, it became an attractive market for buying and selling slaves, not only capable of satisfying its own demand for labour, but also of supplying some of the most dynamic Mediterranean markets.

### ... and Growing Sugarcane

If slave trafficking was seen to be a highly lucrative business, either through the enslavement of the native population, or through raids in the Maghreb and

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>24</sup> Marrero Rodríguez, *Esclavitud en Tenerife* (cf. n. 15), 51–52; Lobo Cabrera, *Ideología* (cf. n. 18), 12–15. During the early years of African navigation, the use of African guides for the organization of the Guinean trade was commonplace. In 1455, for example, the Venetian Alvise Ca'da Mosto stated that each of the ships that formed the fleet in which he was travelling carried “black slaves that had been sold by the lord of Senegal to the first Portuguese Christians that had come to discover the land of the Blacks (*des esclaves noirs qui avaient été vendus par le seigneur de Sénégal aux premiers chrétiens portugais venus découvrir le pays des Noirs*)”, trained in the Portuguese language to serve as commercial agents (*Voyages en Afrique noire d'Alvise Ca'da Mosto (1455 & 1456)*, ed. Frédérique Verrier, Paris 2003, 86). The Canary expeditions to the Guinean coast lasted until 1564, when Philip II banned them in response to Portuguese complaints. However, as had been the case in the Maghreb, they undoubtedly continued, especially after the union of the crowns of Castile and Portugal (1580), even though it is true that, being under the control of the *Casa da Guiné e Mina*, an institution created by the Portuguese to regularize the African trade, they were no longer so profitable; Lobo Cabrera, *Ideología*, (cf. n. 18), 15.

participation in the Atlantic slave trade, something similar occurred with the cultivation of sugarcane. Indeed, these two activities became so closely interrelated that, separately, they probably would not have achieved the levels of development they actually did reach conjoined.

Essentially, the principal strength of the early Canary Islands economy was the wholehearted commitment to the two flagship commodities of Euro-African trade: sugar and slaves. Obviously, this commercial pairing did not come into being as a result of Atlantic expansion; it had originally developed in the Mediterranean Sea in the Late Middle Ages,<sup>25</sup> as had its legal architecture, the naval and military technology and the practical commercial knowledge necessary for organizing economic activities. However, it was in the middle Atlantic where the production and commercialization of sugar and the trafficking and exploitation of slave labour went hand in hand for the first time.

Like Madeira, where sugarcane was introduced in about 1420,<sup>26</sup> Gran Canaria, La Palma and Tenerife possessed an ideal climate and good soils for intensive sugar production. The high demand for a workforce to work in the fields and the sugar mills was quickly met through the use of slaves.

Unlike what had previously been the case in the Mediterranean, where sugar had been an expensive and rather unpopular product in the Late Middle Ages, the lucrative production of sugar was guaranteed thanks to the combination of slave labour and perfect weather. The regions south of the Sahara desert offered slaves in abundance and at low prices. Their massive and intensive use

<sup>25</sup> See Mohamed Ouerfelli, *Le sucre. Production, commercialisation et usages dans la Méditerranée médiévale*, Leiden 2008.

<sup>26</sup> The Portuguese explorer Duarte Pacheco Pereira stated that Prince Henry of Portugal “discovered the island of Madeira in the year of Our Lord 1420, and he ordered it to be settled and he ordered sugar cane to be brought from Sicily to be put under cultivation, and masters to teach the Portuguese how to produce sugar (*descobriu a ilha da Madeira no ano de Nosso Senhor de mil CCCCXX, e a mandou povorar e mandou a Cíçilia pelas canas de açúcar, que nela fez plantar, e pelos mestres que o açúcar ensinaram fazer aos Portugueses*), *Esmeraldo de situ orbis, por Duarte Pacheco Pereira*, ed. Damião Peres, Lisbon 1954, 120. The migration of sugar masters was a common phenomenon in the history of technology transfers during the Middle Ages. The first training centres in the sugar industry were in Egypt and Syria, from where highly skilled workers migrated to Cyprus and Sicily. In the fifteenth century, knowledge of the cultivation of sugar cane and sugar production spread from Sicily to the Iberian Peninsula, especially Valencia. At the end of that century, many of Valencia’s sugar masters migrated to Madeira, where the Portuguese industry was flourishing. From there, masters and their knowledge arrived in the plantations in southwest Morocco, the Canary Islands, Cape Verde and São Tomé; Mohamed Ouerfelli, *L’impact de la production de sucre sur les campagnes méditerranées à la fin du Moyen Âge*, in: *Revue des mondes musulmanes et de la Méditerranée* 126/2 (2009), 47–63, here 59–60.

on sugar plantations lowered the costs of production and increased yields and profits. In short, sugar and slaves were the authentic driving force behind the Atlantic trade revolution, and it is in this association where we find the capitalist ideas that made it possible to extend the mono-cultivation of sugar cane, industrialize the plantations and obtain huge profit margins.

Right from the start, the conquests of Gran Canaria, La Palma and Tenerife established the sugar industry through a system of licenses aimed at the financial elites to stimulate the setting up of plantations and encourage the migration of a qualified workforce, basically from Madeira and, to a lesser extent, the Azores.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, both the physical conditions of the islands and their strategic position for Euro-African trade attracted the interest and the investments of businessmen and trading companies that until then had operated mostly in the Mediterranean and the North Atlantic.

From Madeira, the Canaries received sugar cane and its associated technology, a specialized workforce and occasionally basic supplies, and from the Azores, the isles received settlers and sometimes wheat. In turn, the Canaries supplied the Cape Verde Islands with settlers specializing in the cultivation of sugar cane and factors and representatives of the foreign and Castilian trading companies that came to sell wine and pitch from Tenerife and Gran Canaria and to buy African slaves for use in the sugar cane industry.<sup>28</sup>

From the late fifteenth to the middle of the sixteenth century, regional and interregional relations in the mercantile activity of the Canary Islands were in the hands of the foreigners who settled there or were attracted by them. Sugar, along with slaves, and to a lesser extent cereals and wine, were the focuses of interest of their commercial activities.

<sup>27</sup> Migration from Madeira to the Canary Islands is mainly explained by the attraction that the newly conquered islands must have held for new settlers and the limited economic possibilities of the Portuguese archipelago. In addition, the islands' location, on the route to the West Indies, was doubtlessly a major incentive; Manuel Lobo Cabrera and Margarita I. Martín Socas, *Emigración y comercio entre Madeira y Canarias en el siglo XVI*, in: *Boletim do Instituto Histórico da Ilha Terceira* 41 (1983), 678–701, here 678–679; see also Marrero Rodríguez, *Esclavitud en Tenerife* (cf. n. 15), 31–32; Ana Viña Brito, *La organización social del trabajo en los ingenios azucareros canarios (siglos XV–XVI)*, in: *En la España Medieval* 29 (2006), 359–381, here 363, and Antonio M. Macías Hernández, *La colonización europea y el derecho de aguas. El ejemplo de Canarias, 1480–1525*, in: *Hispania. Revista Española de Historia* 69 (2009), 715–738, here 726; for the links established between the Azores and the Canary Islands during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, see Manuel Lobo and María Elisa Torres Santana, *Aproximación a las relaciones entre Canarias y Azores en los siglos XVI y XVII*, in: *Boletim do Instituto Histórico da Ilha Terceira* 41 (1983), 352–377.

<sup>28</sup> Lobo Cabrera, *Gran Canaria* (cf. n. 21), 314 and 324–325.

Of the foreign communities in the Canaries, the Portuguese and the Italians were by far the most numerous, followed in order of size by Catalans, Valencians and, to a lesser extent, Flemish, French and English. Essentially, their interests focused on purchasing land and setting up sugar mills, money-lending, slave trafficking, importing commodities that were lacking in the islands and exporting Canary Islands sugar and African slaves to Europe.<sup>29</sup>

Thanks to their financial help during the campaigns to conquer Gran Canaria, La Palma and Tenerife, and their subsequent economic activities, the most outstanding businessmen in the various foreign communities established in the islands became part of the archipelago's economic and political elite.

For the conquest of La Palma, for example, Alonso Fernández de Lugo had the financial backing of Francesco Riberol and Gianotto di Lorenzo Berardi—two of the key partners of the Florentine Bartolomeo di Domenico Marchionni, the biggest slave trader of the day<sup>30</sup>—with whom he made common cause, dividing the costs of the enterprise and the profits deriving from it equally.<sup>31</sup> He was also financed by another investor, the Catalan Pere Benavent from Barcelona, who became one of his principal creditors and one of the maximum beneficiaries from the share-out of La Palma. Besides a sugar plantation of approximately four thousand hectares and the right to use half the Los Sauces river, essential for setting up the fields and the mills for cooking and crushing the sugar cane, Pere Benavent also received three ships valued at 650,000 *maravedís*.<sup>32</sup> In this way, Alonso de Lugo settled the debt that he had contracted during the conquest, and Benavent became one of the biggest landowners of La Palma.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> See, for this question, Maria del Cristo González Marrero and Juan Manuel Bello León, *Los otros extranjeros: catalanes, flamencos, franceses e ingleses en la sociedad canaria de los siglos XV y XVI*, in: *Revista de Historia Canaria* 179 (1997), 11–71 and 180 (1998), 13–67.

<sup>30</sup> Francesco Guidi Bruscoli, *Bartolomeo Marchionni, “homem de grossa fazenda” (ca. 1450–1530). Un mercante fiorentino a Lisbona e l'imperio portoghese* (Biblioteca storica toscana 73), Florence 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Eduardo Aznar Vallejo, *La integración de las Islas Canarias en la Corona de Castilla (1478–1526)*, La Laguna 1983, 41–43; Abulafia, *Discovery of Mankind*, (cf. n. 8), 96–100.

<sup>32</sup> See Elías Serra Ráfols, *Las datas de Tenerife (libros I a IV de datas originales)*, La Laguna 1978, doc. 274–1.

<sup>33</sup> For the political and economic activities of Pere Benavent and his family, see Ivan Armenteros-Martínez, *Cataluña en la era de las navegaciones. La participación catalana en la primera economía atlántica (c. 1470–1540)*, Barcelona 2012, 207–213, and Ana Viña Brito, *Los Benavente Cabeza de Vaca, vecinos de Jeréz y grandes propietarios de La Palma (Canarias)*, in: *Andalucía Medieval. Actas del III Congreso de Historia de Andalucía*, vol. 2, Córdoba 2003, 323–336.

Many of the foreign merchants established in the Canary Islands thus became major landowners through the accumulation of properties obtained in the share-outs, or through sales and purchases and the collection of unpaid loans. They were closely associated with the production and commercialization of sugar, cereals and wine. They were part of the networks of the early slave trade and the dispatch of slaves to the Iberian Peninsula. They ensured their social ascent through mixed marriages, usually with the daughters and granddaughters of the Castilian conquerors, without doubt one of the most advantageous strategies for their definitive integration at the summit of colonial society. Their economic and social strength gained them access to political power through the accumulation of public positions in the municipal councils of the islands. Finally, entering the economic and political elites created suitable conditions for their descendants to follow in their footsteps helping to keep the business buoyant and managing the family fortune.<sup>34</sup>

As I have been saying, the two mainstays of the Euro-African economy, sugar and slaves, also became the principal foundations of the Canary Islands economy. Sugar from the Canaries and the African slaves that passed through there soon began reaching the main markets of the Christian Western Mediterranean. In Valencia and Barcelona, for example, from the late fifteenth century onwards the movement of ships to and from the Canaries increased notably.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the transportation of Canary Island and African commodities became one of the principal economic engines of Valencia.<sup>36</sup> Concurrently, in virtually no time at all Barcelona became the main centre for finance and maritime insurance for the Catalan companies that operated in the Canary Islands and the Atlantic coast of Andalusia.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> González Marrero and Bello León, *Los otros extranjeros* (cf. n. 29).

<sup>35</sup> For the trafficking of slaves from the Canary Islands to Valencia and Barcelona, see Vicenta Cortés Alonso, *La esclavitud en Valencia durante el reinado de los Reyes Católicos (1479–1516)*, Valencia 1964, and Iván Armenteros Martínez, *L'esclavitud a la Barcelona del Renaixement (1479–1516). Un port mediterrani sota la influència del primer tràfic negrer*, Barcelona 2015.

<sup>36</sup> José Hinojosa Montalvo, Cesaro Barchi y otros mercaderes florentinos en la ciudad de Valencia en el tránsito del medievo a la modernidad, in: *Sardegna, Mediterraneo e Atlantico tra Medioevo ed Età Moderna. Studi Storici in memoria di Alberto Boscolo*, ed. Luisa d'Arienzo, Cagliari 1993, vol. 3, 231–249, here 232–235; María Rosa Muñoz Pomer, Germán Navarro Espinach and David Igual Luis, El comercio de importación portugués en Valencia, 1487–1488, in: *Os Reinos Ibéricos na Idade Média. Livro de Homenagem ao Professor Doutor Humberto Carlos Baquero Moreno*, ed. Luis Adão da Fonseca, Luis Carlos Amaral and Maria Fernanda Ferreira Santo, Porto 2003, vol. 3, 1121–1131, here 1125.

<sup>37</sup> Maria Teresa Ferrer i Mallol, El comercio catalán en Andalucía a fines del siglo XV, in: *La Península Ibérica en la Era de los Descubrimientos (1391–1492)*, *Actas de las III Jor-*

The Atlantic trading revolution and Ottoman hegemony in the Central and Eastern Mediterranean had brought about a substantial change in the logic of economic circulation. Whereas until the mid-fifteenth century Barcelona had been one of the most dynamic trading and financial centres in the Mediterranean, from the 1490s onwards it became the main insurance centre for the Catalan companies that, although they had come into being in the context of the Mediterranean, had gone on to concentrate virtually all their main activity in the middle Atlantic. Along with them, the flow of capital and human resources towards the Atlantic islands was, to say the least, notable.

The company of the Font family from Barcelona is a case in point. The earliest news we have of its commercial activities dates back to the first half of the fifteenth century, when we find them operating in the Western Mediterranean and occasionally taking part in long-distance trade between Barcelona, Flanders and the east coast of the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>38</sup> After 1490, however, the company's commercial strategy changed radically and focused on the Atlantic, firstly in Andalusia, and after 1504 in the Canary Islands. When two members of the family, the brothers Rafael and Miquel Font, established themselves in Tenerife, they used it as a platform from which to build an authentic economic and political empire. They accumulated extensive assets in the islands and participated actively in the production of sugar and its commercialization all over the Mediterranean, even sending cargoes from the Canaries to Alexandria, via Barcelona or Valencia. They became one of the principal traffickers of slaves between the Canary Islands and the Iberian Peninsula and joined the economic and political elite of the islands, all the while maintaining strong financial links with Barcelona.<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusion

During the early decades of European expansion down the coast of West Africa, the middle Atlantic was seen as a logical extension of the Mediterranean Sea and the trading and warfare that had taken place in it during the Middle Ages.

*nadas Hispano-Portuguesas de Historia Medieval (1991)*, ed. Manuel González Jiménez, Seville 1997, vol. 1, 421–452 (with Catalan version in *Acta Historica et Archaeologica Mediaevalia* 18 [1997]).

<sup>38</sup> Mario del Treppo, *I mercanti catalani e l'espansione della Corona d'Aragona nel secolo XV*, Naples 1972, 145; Claude Carrère, *Barcelone. Centre économique à l'époque des difficultés, 1380–1462*, Paris 1967), vol. 1, 491, n. 4; 462, n. 1; 518, n. 4; vol. 2, 916, n. 5.

<sup>39</sup> See Armenteros, Cataluña (cf. n. 33), 213–228.

Until the end of the sixteenth century, when sugar production collapsed and the American economy began to take off, the Canaries played an important role of interconnectivity between the Mediterranean and the middle Atlantic. This interconnectivity was not just physical. It also acted as a link between the commercial practices that had been developed in the Mediterranean during the previous period and the new ones emerging in the Atlantic, closely associated with the extensive production of sugar and the intensive use of slave labour.

Just as the conquest and the colonization of the Canaries was a project born of the experience accumulated in the Mediterranean, the economic activities of the businessmen established in the archipelago originated in the late medieval Mediterranean experience. The establishment of trading companies, the design of the routes for transporting goods and the organization of the raids on the coast of Mauritania followed a wholly Mediterranean pattern. The Canary Islands were merely a new area of economic exploitation, as the ports of Alexandria and Damietta had been in the past, or a new frontier on which to extend the pattern of border warfare. The only peculiarity was that, on this new occasion, the geographical theatre of operations had shifted from the Mediterranean and the coast of North Africa to the middle Atlantic and the coast of West Africa. This new area quickly became a privileged place in which to combine Mediterranean commercial techniques with proto-capitalism based on the mono-cultivation of sugarcane on large plantations and the massive use of slave labour.

In many ways, then, this early expansion into the Atlantic was the result of a natural extension of the Mediterranean as a physical space, the trading practices that had been developed since the Late Middle Ages, and experimentation with other completely new ones that endowed the early Atlantic economy with great strength and dynamism.

## **Acknowledgements**

Iván Armenteros Martínez, Institució Mila i Fontanals - CSIC, Barcelona / Aix-Marseille Université, CNRS, LabexMed, LA3M UMR 7298 / TELEMME UMR 7303. This paper is part of my collaboration with the research project “Tripulaciones, armamentos, construcción naval y navegación en el Mediterráneo medieval (HAR2013-48433-C2-1-P)”, directed by Dr Roser Salicrú i Lluch.