

**Motors of Production or Voracious Usurers.  
The Conflicts between the Genoese Colonist and Castilian Authorities Regarding Landownership and  
Sugar Production in the Canary Islands (1489-1516).**

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**Abstract**

*This paper studies the conflict between Genoese merchants on the one hand, and Canarian local authorities and Castilian colonists on the other, regarding the alleged Genoese hoarding of land in the Canary Islands at the end of the fifteenth century. It shows the roots of the conflict and the veracity of the claims made in the 1490s by neighbors of Gran Canaria, who stated that the Genoese owned over half of the land available for growing sugar cane. Also, it studies the apparent Genoese success in Macaronesia, as it relates to the movement of Mediterranean institutions, such as slavery and the plantation economy, to the Atlantic. It shows that the Genoese were crucial in the introduction of the plantation economy in the Canaries. They dominated the local market thanks to their international commercial networks and their success in joining the production aspects of sugar cane growth and its transformation into sugar. Their plantations and mills operated with an imported workforce of enslaved people and Portuguese sugar masters. Nevertheless, their success came to an end when the plantation economy that they had created exhausted itself. In turn, it argues that the source of conflict corresponds to the way Castile responded to the economic reality in the Canaries, the measures were directed against social symptoms and not the underlying cause of the social unrest against Genoese success.*

**Keywords:** Genoese history, Atlantic history, plantation economy, land property, identity politics

The expansion of frontiers changed the European perception of time and space drastically in the late Middle Ages, the world got bigger, travel got more dangerous, and news got slower. Even for territories relatively close to the European continent, like the Canary Islands, these changes could be felt and the presence of the king's justice became ever so distant. Richard Dunn in *Sugar and Slaves* wrote about "to live beyond the line," referring to the way Europeans interacted socially and politically in the Caribbean<sup>1</sup>. For the period of his study, the seventeenth century, it meant a disregard both for diplomatic treaties and general social protocols; norms and knowledge were frequently pushed in the pursuit of land, opportunities, and goods. However, since the thirteenth century Christian Europeans started to push the frontier of the Atlantic world, led by the Genoese seamen, pushing the boundaries of what was civil, lawful, and acceptable. This paper studies the conflict between Genoese merchants on the one hand, and Canarian local authorities and Castilian colonists on the other, regarding the alleged Genoese hoarding of land for sugar production in the islands. It shows the roots of the conflict and the veracity of the claims made in the 1490s by neighbors of Gran Canaria, who stated that the Genoese owned over half of the land available for growing sugar cane. Also, it studies the apparent Genoese success in Macaronesia, as it relates to the movement of Mediterranean institutions, such as slavery and the plantation economy, to the Atlantic.

In the twentieth century the economic history of the Canaries came to be reduced as one of cycles. Each up and down characterized by one particular crop or good destined for export, the innovative force of foreign capital, technologies, and agents.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of the accuracy of the statement, after the conquest of the main archipelago's islands<sup>3</sup> sugar cane was introduced with the hope of emulating the success of Madeira.<sup>4</sup> Sugar production in the islands was successful almost immediately, with surviving records of fully functional plantations within three years of the conquest of Gran Canaria.<sup>5</sup> Sugar production would become the fuel for the first wave of colonization in the Canaries and also the first cause of social disputes.

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<sup>1</sup> R. Dunn, *Sugar and slaves: the rise of the planter class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713* (UNC Press Books, 2012), p.12.

<sup>2</sup> M. Díaz, *Síntesis de historia económica de Canarias* (1934).

<sup>3</sup> Gran Canaria in 1483, Tenerife in 1496, La Palma in 1493.

<sup>4</sup> A. Vieira, "O Açúcar na Madeira: Produção e comércio nos séculos-XV a XVII," *Producción y comercio del azúcar de caña en época preindustrial* 7 (1993); A. Vieira, *O comércio inter-insular nos séculos XV e XVI: Madeira, Açores e Canárias: (alguns elementos para o seu estudo)* (Região Autónoma Da Madeira, Secretaria Regional Do Turismo, Cultura e Emigração: Centro De Estudos De História Do Atlântico, 1987); A. Vieira, "A Ilha da Madeira e o tráfico negreiro no Século XVI," *Revista de Índias* 55, no. 204 (1995): 333.

<sup>5</sup> M. Gambín García, *El ingenio de Agaete. Oro dulce en Gran Canaria a comienzos del siglo XVI* (Oristán y Gociano Editores, 2008), pp. 84-85

The importance of the Ligurians in Spain is commonly identified as one of great bankers and lenders of money to the mismanaged arcs of the Spanish monarchies.<sup>6</sup> This identification is supported by the fact that, the Centurione and Spinola replaced the Fugger and Welser in the sixteenth century and managed the finances of the Crown, up to the Duke of Olivares takes the role in the seventeenth century. Historiographically the discipline relies heavily on the work of the mid-twentieth century. Braudel's, Otte's, Heer's, and López's work created the myth of "the century of the Genoese," which, although acknowledges the importance and part of the Ligurians in the finances of the Iberian monarchies. They sprang from a characteristic italo-centrism about the Ligurian's role as bankers, overlooking the complex dynamics of markets like those of Seville and Valencia, which were tightly integrated to the global market since the Middle Ages. Also, these works argue mistaken ideas like the suggestion that the Genoese owed their success to the capacity of their women to produce numerous male heirs.<sup>7</sup>

The study of the Genoese in the Atlantic has two facets: the work known by the international academy on one side and the productive local scholarship in Spanish on the other. On the international scene, their relationships of the Genoese with the first Governor of Tenerife, Antonio Fernández de Lugo, studied by Otte and de la Rosa, have been outlined. Also, the works of Fernández-Armesto take on Columbus, exploration, and colonization, and have been disseminated widely.<sup>8</sup> The work carried out by Aznar and Viña from the University of La Laguna in Tenerife address early settler politics and sugar cane production.<sup>9</sup> Although their work recognizes the importance of the Genoese, it does not center around them.<sup>10</sup> Overall, There exists an understanding of the general social and political situation after the conquest and the gross production of sugar. However, the study of the economic-political processes like, the implementation of enslaved labor, integration with the wider international market, soil exhaustion, and the arrival of Europeans to America, continue to be the subject of research.<sup>11</sup> It is in this context that this study sets off. It is also important to highlight that this article confronts the phenomena of the evolution of Mediterranean institutions to the Atlantic, if not across the globe. Genoa's eastern colonies also produced sugar, as did Sicily, which was dominated by Genoa despite not being a colony.<sup>12</sup>

### From trading to producing

The socio-economic development of the insular world was linked to the demands of the Euro-Atlantic economy. The peripheral regions of the European business adjusted their economic development to the needs of the European main market and food shortages. Then they became a consumer market for continental-produced manufactures under conditions of exchange that favored the old continent and, finally, they intervened as intermediaries

<sup>6</sup> R. M. Girón Pascual, *Comercio y poder. Mercaderes genoveses en el sureste de Castilla durante los siglos XVI y XVII* (Valladolid, Universidad de Valladolid-Cátedra Simón Ruiz, 2018), p. 30.

<sup>7</sup> E. Otte, *Sevilla, siglo XVI: Materiales para su historia económica* (Centro de Estudios Andaluces, 2008), p. 188.

<sup>8</sup> E. Otte, "Los sopranis y los Lugo," in *II Coloquio de Historia Canario-Americana* (1977) (Cabildo de Gran Canaria, 1987), 239–259; L. de la Rosa Olivera, "La varia fortuna de los Rivarola," *Anuario de Estudios Atlánticos* 1, no. 12 (1966): 167–200; F. Fernández-Armesto et al., *The Canary Islands after the conquest: the making of a colonial society in the early sixteenth century* (Oxford University Press, 1982).

<sup>9</sup> E. Aznar Vallejo, "La transmisión del señorío de Canarias en el siglo XV. Nuevos documentos y nuevas perspectivas," *Boletín de la Real Academia de la Historia* 204, no. 2 (2007): 221–260; E. Aznar Vallejo and A. Viña Brito, "El azúcar en Canarias," *La caña de azúcar en tiempos de los Grandes Descubrimientos (1450–1550). Actas del Primer Seminario Internacional Granada*, 1989; B. Pérez, "Francisco de Riberol. Un genovés sevillano canario en el sistema europeo de relaciones," in *Andalucía en el mundo Atlántico moderno: agentes y escenarios* (2016), 195–213; J. M. Bello León, "La Torre: homenaje a Emilio Alfaro Hardisson," chap. Contribución a la biografía del mercader Francisco de Riberol [1458-1514], ed. M. R. Álvarez Martínez and E. Alfaro Hardisson (Artemisa, 2005), 125–135.

<sup>10</sup> Aznar Vallejo and Viña Brito, "El azúcar en Canarias"; A. d. C. Viña Brito and M. Ronquillo Rubio, "El primer ciclo del azúcar en Canarias. Balance historiográfico," in *XVI Coloquio de Historia Canario Americana* (Cabildo de Gran Canaria y Casa de Colon, 2006), 261–406; A. Viña Brito, "La organización social del trabajo en los ingenios azucareros canarios (siglos XV- XVI)/The Social Organization of Work in Sugar Mills of the Canary Islands (15th-16th centuries)," *En la España medieval* 29 (2006): 359.

<sup>11</sup> M. Gambín García et al., "Especialistas y trabajadores en el ingenio de azúcar de Agaete (1503-1504)," *Revista de Historia Canaria*, no. 190 (2008); J. Pérez Morera, *el azúcar y su cultura en las islas atlánticas*, vol. 1, 500 años de la palma y flandes (cabildo insular de la palma, 2013); S. el Moussaoui Calderón, *Mercaderes Genoveses en Sevilla en el primer tercio del siglo XVI: entre Europa y America* (Asociación provincial Svillana de cronistas e investigadores locales, 2021).

<sup>12</sup> M. Ouerfelli, *Le sucre: production, commercialisation et usages dans la Méditerranée médiévale* (Brill, 2007).

transoceanic commerce. From the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Macaronesia territories defined themselves as a contact and support center for African, Indian, and American trade.

In addition to all this, the interests of the bourgeoisie and the ruling aristocracy intersected in the processes of occupation and economic valorization of the new Macaronesian societies and economies. The Iberian component was reinforced by the participation of the Mediterranean business interests that appeared attracted by new markets, and easy and rapid expansion of their trade. A group of Genoese linked to the great Mediterranean commercial companies actively participated in the process of reconnaissance, conquest, and occupation of new Atlantic space. Their penetration into the insular world was unimpeded and led them to reach an important position in Canarian society and economy. The investment of capital of mercantile foreign origin appeared only in the perspective of the new market economy, being a generator of new wealth adequate to the requests of the exchange. Sugar cane holds the top position in this case. The discoveries were allied to the commerce and therefore from the middle of the fifteenth century, an assiduous trade with European markets was activated with the availability of wood, orchil, wheat, and later sugar and wine. This movement, which spread to Nordic and Mediterranean cities, motivated the interest of foreigners in the sugar trade. The Atlantic, whether the Macaronesia or West Africa, was in pre-conquest time a site of commerce. Merchants went to the islands and along the African coast to capture slaves and trade dyes and pelts with the natives. Different accounts by the medieval explorers of the Atlantic talk about the landscapes, people, and available goods. For example, Boccaccio *De Canaria et insulis reliquis ultra Hispaniam in Oceano noviter repertis* and Bontier's *De Canarian* describe the daily value in the minds of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.<sup>13 15</sup> At this time, although sugar was not on the minds of the settlers, slavery was. The descriptions and chronicles speak of fertile land and gentle weather; of the potential to grow, with ease and in greater quantities, everything that grew back in mainland Europe.

Correspondingly, the accounts surviving from Portuguese enterprises share on the same spirit as the previously mentioned. After all, the Portuguese crown started the exploration and occupation of Madeira and the Canary Islands in the fifteenth century. The first permanent settlement was in Madeira, in the south of Madeira, between present-day Machico and Calheta, where the landscape was warmer than on the other side of the island, because it was better protected from the trade winds.<sup>14</sup> Sugar cane expanded quickly on the island. In 1450 the accounts of Cadamosto noted its success:

At his command they came to our galleys with samples of sugar from the *Isola de Medera*, dragon's blood, and other products of his domains and islands.

The Infante had many sugar canes planted, to his great profit. They have produced sugar to the amount of 400 *cantara* at one refining, and from what I understand they will in time produce more...<sup>15</sup>

Portuguese sugar production grew rapidly after Cadamosto's accounts. Alberto Vieira argues that between the 1450s and the 1470s sugar production grew at 13%, and from 1470s to 1490s 68% per year.<sup>16</sup> However, this history is one of the faster phases as frontier expansion and soil exhaustion moved the production sites quickly across the globe. From Madeira the next production site was located in the main islands of the Canaries archipelago. Then the production frontier moved to Morocco and Sao Tome, and finally to Brazil in the first half of the sixteenth century. By 1530, Madeira and the Canaries were left behind as the primary producers of sugar cane in favor of more profitable sites (especially ones in Brazil). In both archipelagos, settlers turned to cattle, wheat, and vineyards.<sup>17</sup> This turn corresponded with the integration of the archipelagos to the *Carrera de Indias*.<sup>18</sup> The islands' strategic location in route to America had made for a perfect port for the furnishing of goods in continuation to the western continent.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>13</sup> P. Bontier and J. Le Verrier, *The Canarian: Or, Book of the Conquest and Conversion of the Canarians in the Year 1402*, vol. 46 (Hakluyt Society, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Vieira, "A Ilha da Madeira e o tráfico negreiro no Século XVI."

<sup>15</sup> G. R. Crone, *The voyages of Cadamosto and other documents on Western Africa in the second half of the fifteenth century* (Routledge, 2017), p.4 & 9.

<sup>16</sup> A. Vieira, "Sugar islands. The sugar economy of Madeira and the Canaries, 1450-1650," in *Tropical Babylons: Sugar and the Making of the Atlantic World, 1450-1680* (University of North Carolina Press Chapel Hill, 2004), p.48.

<sup>17</sup> J. W. Moore, "Madeira, Sugar, and the Conquest of Nature in the 'First' Sixteenth Century, Part II: From Regional Crisis to Commodity Frontier, 1506-1530," *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, 2010, 1-24.

<sup>18</sup> P. L. D. Cruz, "El agua en Canarias: una aproximación historiográfica," *Vegueta: Anuario de la Facultad de Geografía e Historia*, 2013, J. Hernández Ramos, *Las heredades de aguas de Gran Canaria* (Idea, 2004); G. C. y Pérez Galdós, "El cultivo de la caña de azúcar y la industria azucarera en Gran Canaria (1510-1535)," *Anuario de Estudios Atlánticos* 1, no. 7 (1961): 11-70; L. E. López, J. L. del Río Moreno, et al., "La ganadería vacuna en la isla Española (1508-1587)," *Revista Complutense de historia de América*, no. 25 (1999): 11-49.

<sup>19</sup> J. M. Madurell Marimón, "El antiguo comercio con las islas Canarias y las Indias de Nueva España o del mar Océano (1498-1638). Más documentos para su historia," *Anuario de Estudios Atlánticos* 1, no. 7 (1961): 71-130; 82

In the Canaries the Genoese entered into possession of land and of sugar by various means. In Gran Canaria, the Ligurians were investors. They ventured funds into the island's conquest as well as into the creation of plantations by Castilian settlers. Securing the conquest's success meant that the merchants could have access to a secure, profitable, and friendly market. The prospective goods offered by the Canaries were of great interest, especially if they would come at a lower price or free as repayment for the conquest funding. It was a bet which would pay the lenders regardless of the success of the settlers to pay their debt. The Genoese played a win-win game: if the loans could not be paid in coin, then they accepted goods; if there were no goods, there was land. Alongside the capitalistic growth of their loan and exchange network, the Genoese also purchased land from conquerors who did not wish to remain on the island or have the means to exploit the country. It was through the Genoese' ravenous accumulation of property that discontent and restlessness fostered in the minds of the Castilian settlers.

The distribution of the land after the conquest of Canary Islands was far from even or equal. Those settling the islands had the condition to remain and live there for at least five years and to dedicate most of the land to grow sugar cane. The Genoese experience on the archipelago varies depending on the family. It was not a colonial enterprise but more of a bet taken by some families with the monetary capacity and right connections. This strategy was coherent with the market and general Ligurian history. One major distinction that can be drawn between different Ligurian experiences divides those that arrived with the Adelantado Antonio de Lugo, even taking a role in the conquest of the land, from others who arrived later as merchants and settlers.

In the group of Genoese who arrived first, alongside the Adelantado, appeared the figure of Mateo Viña.<sup>20</sup> From the start, Viña formed part of the government, being *regidor* from 1500 to 1506. Because of his connection to the governor, he became part of the public life of the island.<sup>21</sup> He had accompanied Lugo's second campaign for the conquest of Tenerife in 1494. It is said that he participated in battles, and as such received land in the distribution alongside the Castilians.<sup>22</sup> He received land which could be described as difficult or not the best, at Daute, far from the two main ports of Tenerife – Santa Cruz de Tenerife and Puerto de la Cruz (fig. 1). His enterprise required a larger than average investment for the land's adaptation to create the conditions to succeed in the exploitation of sugar. His commitment is evident in the records of the reformation of the land distribution on Tenerife: "this witness saw the arrival at *Dabte* [Daute] of a caravan with tools, goods, and slaves. Everything brought by said Mateo Viña to extract water in Dabte and make the irrigation ditch."<sup>23</sup>

The conquest enterprise required more than just the bodies and money to conduct the military expedition. From the mainland, in Seville, the race to secure the papal bull was shared responsibility of Diego de Soria and Francesco Pinelli.<sup>24</sup>



B. Bonnet, "Descripción de las Canarias en el año 1526, hecha por Tomás Nichols, factor inglés," *Revista de Historia Canaria* 5 (1933); G. Camacho and P. Galdós, "Cultivos de cereales, viña y huerta en Gran Canaria (1510-1537)," *Anuario de Estudios Atlánticos*, no. 12 (1966): 223-279

<sup>20</sup> Historic Provincial Archive of Santa Cruz de Tenerife (AHPStCT), Notarial Protocols (PN), 8. Páez, 1506-1508, fol. 440r de 16-VII-1506, fol. 399r de 17.VII-1606, y fol. 97r de 22 X-1506.

<sup>21</sup> M. Marrero Rodríguez, "Los genoveses en la colonización de Tenerife: 1496-1509," *Revista de Historia*, no. 89 (1950): 52-65.

<sup>22</sup> É. Serra, *Las datas de Tenerife (1978): libros I a IV de datas originales (Fontes Rerum Canariarum, 1978)*, p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> Translation made by the author: "este testigovío descargar en la caleta de Dabte una caravana con mantenimientos e herramientas y esclavos, lo qual todo traía el dicho Mateo Viña para sacar el agua de Dabte e hacer el acequia." L. de la Rosa Olivera and E. Sierra, eds., *Reformación del Repartimiento de Tenerife en 1506*, Fontes Rerum Canarium (Instituto de Estudios Canarios de la Universidad de la Laguna, 1953), p.78.

<sup>24</sup> J. M. Bello León et al., "Los negocios de los mercaderes Francesco Pinelli y Diego de Soria en el Atlántico Medio a finales del siglo XV," *Revista de Historia Canaria*, no. 200 (2018): 59-72; A. Rumeu de Armas, "La nunciatura castellana de Guinea," *Revista de Indias* 27 (1967): 109; E. Aznar Vallejo, "Los inicios de la Bula de Cruzada en Canarias," *Revista española de derecho canónico* 44, no. 122 (1987): 205-219.

(a) Gran Canaria

(b) Tenerife

Figure 1 Possible distribution of land under Genoese ownership at the end of 1530s, highlighted in yellow. Water sources like rivers or creeks are highlighted in blue.

The Papal bull meant a parallel financial instrument used to secure the money for the conquest, evangelism, and the war against Islam. Pinelli, and others of his family, resided in Seville. Furthermore, in Gran Canaria there was a certain Luis Pinelli who received land in the distribution after the conquest.<sup>25</sup> It is known that alongside Francesco Pinelli were also Manfredo Camila, Domenico Centurione, Jerónimo y Cipriano Gentile, collection of the Bull of the Crusade, *annatas*, subsidies and jubilees belonging to the Apostolic Chamber in 1475.<sup>26</sup>

At the time of the opening of sugar production in the Atlantic, sugar markets already existed in and around the Mediterranean, and some of them were exploited by the Genoese. The main sites of sugar production could be found at Sicily, Muslim Andalusia, Valencia, Cyprus, Crete, and Egypt.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, sugar cane grew across the Mediterranean world as a common crop. However, it never grew in the volume and intensity that received in the Atlantic from the fifteenth century onwards.<sup>28</sup> Sicily represented a Genoese stronghold in terms of sugar. From the plantation of Ficcarazzi, near Palermo, property of Francesco di Negro, a set of very important sources survive, which describe the cultivation and production of sugar, and the functioning of a sugar cane mill, under Genoese direction at the end of the sixteenth century.<sup>29</sup> Rebora in his study of this plantation makes three main points: First, for generations free individuals composed the plantation's workforce. Second, the technology used in the processing of sugar cane came from the olive oil industry. Finally, the sugar cane industry in Sicily was one among several productive enterprises of equal relevance and importance – wheat, vines, and olive trees.<sup>30</sup> Sugar cane was important, but not the main source of revenue for Sicilians. Thus, it never received intensive and extensive exploitation.

Francisco Riberol represents a compelling example to illustrate the Genoese operation in the Canaries.<sup>31</sup> For an enterprise to combine production and distribution is not necessarily the most profitable option; especially if distribution relies on risky maritime transportation, it seems unnecessary to expose the business to such risk. But the Riberol family, particularly Francisco Riberol and his brother Cosme, took the risk, and it paid high dividends at first. Additionally, Thanks to the loans that they had made towards the conquest of the Canaries, which Alonso Fernández de Lugo was unable to pay back monetarily, they obtained access to important extensions of land on the islands. Lands put to produce Sugar cane. Parallel to this enterprise, in Tenerife, La Gomera, and El Hierro, a different stroke of luck benefited Francisco. Ines Herrera, the widow of Guillen de Peraza, lord and conqueror of the minor islands of the archipelago, gave Riberol a ten-year monopoly over the trade of orchil. Finally, for almost twenty years, they alone held the soap *almonas* of Triana, and for another ten, they shared them with others.<sup>32</sup> Alongside these enterprises, regular trade in silk, olive oil and other goods completed the portfolio of investment and production conducted by the Riberol.

For the Riberol, the Canaries represented the land of success and failure. First, the Genoese operated in a system of relationships, and Francisco and Cosme were no exception. From the stable community in southern Andalusia, the Canaries represented a new market of opportunities, for this Ligurian, described by Beatriz

<sup>25</sup> General Archive of Simancas (AGS). Cámara de Castilla, CED, 7,133 (18-12-1505). AGS. Registro del Sello (RGS), 18-12-1505

<sup>26</sup> Bello León et al., “Los negocios de los mercaderes Francesco Pinelli y Diego de Soria en el Atlántico Medio a finales del siglo XV,” p.63

<sup>27</sup> Ouerfelli, *Le sucre: production, commercialisation et usages dans la Méditerranée médiévale*.

<sup>28</sup> D. Harreld, “Atlantic sugar and Antwerp's trade with Germany in the sixteenth century,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 7, no. 1 (2003): pp.475–493. J. W. Moore, “Madeira, Sugar, and the Conquest of Nature in the First Sixteenth Century: Part I: From “Island of Timber” to Sugar Revolution, 1420–1506,” *Review of Fernand Braudel Center*, 2009, 345–390; S. W. Mintz, *Sweetness and power: The place of sugar in modern history* (Penguin, 1986); Ouerfelli, *Le sucre: production, commercialisation et usages dans la Méditerranée médiévale*.

<sup>29</sup> G. Rebora, *Un'impresa zuccheriera del Cinquecento*, vol. 14 (Biblioteca degli Annali di storia economica e sociale, 1968).

<sup>30</sup> R Rebora, *Un'impresa zuccheriera del Cinquecento*, pp. 15–30 & 51–56.

<sup>31</sup> Extensively studied in the past: Otte, “Los sopranis y los Lugo”; Rosa Olivera, “La varia fortuna de los Rivarola”; Pérez, “Francisco de Riberol. Un genovés sevillano canario en el sistema europeo de relaciones”; Bello León, “La Torre: homenaje a Emilio Alfaro Hardisson.”

<sup>32</sup> Historic Provincial Archive of Seville (AHPSe), Leg.1508-1, 1508, ff.348-349v.



Perez as a Genoese “Sevillian.”<sup>33</sup> At the end of the fifteenth century his business network extended in the Castilian territories through two main families. First, the Sánchez from the treasury, a very wealthy Valencian family connected to the Genoese in general.<sup>34</sup> Second, the Fernández de Lugo who owned lands near Jerez de la Frontera and were the forerunners of the Canarian conquest. Thanks to the Lugo the Genoese accessed the trade of orchil from the Canaries.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, when Antonio de Lugo needed funding for the conquest of Tenerife, Riberol lent him the funds to pursue the campaign.<sup>36</sup> The Sánchez and the Riberol funded the fourth voyage of Columbus and participated together in the movement of bills of exchange between Seville and Valencia.<sup>37</sup> In addition to these enterprises, in the first decade of the sixteenth century, Juan Sánchez and Francisco Riberol faced justice together for the malversation of 200,000 *mrs.*<sup>38</sup> Eventually, all of these relationships went sour, because of a family tragedies or bad business.

The same success that created the fame and wealth of the Riberol, also condemned them. Their success in the Canaries with the trade in sugar and orchil arouse the jealousy of others. Complaints were raised to the Spanish monarchs about the monopoly on commerce and land that the Genoese held in the Canaries. In turn, the monarchs banned foreigners from possessing land there.<sup>39</sup> Ines Herrerade Peraza and her son realized that their business with the Riberol left them with the short end of an incredibly profitable commerce. They tried to breach the contract or finish their agreement. Both situations grew into long and tedious legal battles that lasted for years, and one could argue resulted in the death of Francisco Riberol’s only son Batista.

In this process of market evolution and constant change, the Genoese merchants were determinant. Their interests did not end with the conquest of the Canaries. They were present in the Portuguese expeditions to Western Africa. Their network of interests connected the Iberian Peninsula with the Atlantic possessions and all foreign markets, whether northern Atlantic or Mediterranean. This bourgeois process developed and consolidated these new societies. As private merchants and investors, free from political pretensions, the Genoese gained a position and privileges that cost other European powers centuries to establish because of their colonial and territorial needs. Their investment of capital and labour was fundamental to the initial enterprises. Most importantly, commerce allowed for the flow of goods and the survival of colonial society.

The Genoese from Andalusia established their production of sugar in the Atlantic islands. They possessed the mills to transform the cane into sugar and controlled a critical trade size. Although later in the sixteenth century, English and Flemish merchants entered to take part in the production and to control the northern trading routes, their presence was later than the time frame covered by this research and after the most prosperous sugar cycle in Macaronesia. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that, even at the peak of Genoese power in these territories, their experience was not without troubles, because of the resentments aroused by their possession of land and their control over access to international markets. Both the Portuguese and Castilian monarchs knew the importance of these merchants and their connection to the broader European market. All the complaints and requests of their subjects directed against the foreign merchants were only half answered. The Cortes of Coimbra (1472-73) and Evora (1481) never successfully removed the privileges of foreign merchants. There the complaints were directed plainly against Genoese and Jewish people.<sup>40</sup> The prohibition of landholding in the Canaries by the Catholic monarch was impossible to enforce, as the Ligurians were subjects of the monarch by privilege (*naturalizados*) and residence. Thus, subject to the same rights and privileges as regular Castilians.

### The Genoese business

In order to understand the commercialization and profitability of sugar, it is important to address the problems of landholding, water access, and slavery. These three phenomena coexisted and determined the productive cycles

<sup>33</sup> Pérez, “Francisco de Riberol. Un genovés sevillano canario en el sistema europeo de relaciones,” p. 196.

<sup>34</sup> M. A. Ladero Quesada, “La esclavitud por Guerra a fines del siglo XV: el caso de Málaga,” *Hispania* 27, no.105 (1967): 63.

<sup>35</sup> Perez, “Francisco de Riberol. Un genovés sevillano canario en el sistema europeo de relaciones,” p. 201.

<sup>36</sup> AGS, RGS, Leg. 1101, f. 90. AGS, Camara de Castilla (cc), Pueblos, 5, 1, 100, Islas Canarias, 1514.

<sup>37</sup> D. Igual Luis, “Valencia y Sevilla en el sistema económico genovés de finales del siglo XV.” *Revista D’historia Medieval*, no. 3 (1992): 79–116; Pérez, “Francisco de Riberol. Un genovés sevillano canario en el sistema europeo de relaciones.

<sup>38</sup> AHPSe, PNS, Leg. 9101, 1501 ff. 133v-135v.

<sup>39</sup> E. Aznar Vallejo, *Documentos canarios en el Registro del Sello (1476-1517)* (Instituto de Estudios Canarios, 1981), p. 96.

<sup>40</sup> Vieira, “Sugar islands. The sugar economy of Madeira and the Canaries, 1450-1650.”

of sugar cane exploitation. As said before, the history of the Canaries is intrinsically connected to the history of Madeira. In the smaller archipelago, the Portuguese occupation started early in the fifteenth century. In contrast, on the main islands of the Canaries, formal occupation started in the 1480s with the conquest of Gran Canaria.

From 1439 to 1497, the Order of Christ held a *senhorio* over the two islands of Madeira's archipelago.<sup>41</sup> In turn, these were divided into three captaincies: Funchal, Porto Santo, and Machico. Porto Santo was given to Bartholomeu Perestello (1446), an Italian merchant and father-in-law to Christopher Columbus. Perestello's origin has raised as much discussion as that of his son-in-law, with some identifying him as Portuguese or Genoese.<sup>42</sup> Recent studies have traced back his origin to Piacenza.<sup>43</sup> It was up to men like Perestello to attract settlers and make it profitable. In doing so, they brought sugar cane and slaves from the Canaries to work the land.<sup>44</sup> The Canaries, of much bigger land extension, started under seigniorial control in 1402: Fuerteventura, Lanzarote, La Gomera, and El Hierro. The main islands were under royal control from 1478: Gran Canaria, Tenerife, and La Palma. The smaller islands were conquered quickly early in the century, but little profit could spring from them. The men who carried out those early expeditions were unable to continue the conquest of the main islands because of the large aboriginal population; the presence of the first inhabitants represented a crucial difference in the process of settlement of Madeira. As in the Canaries, the indigenous people confronted colonists with rival land claims, both in defending their land from conquest and later as royal subjects.<sup>45</sup>

The Portuguese Crown gave their captains the authority to distribute the lands. The process followed the repopulation policies carried out after the *Reconquista* on the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>46</sup> and their families. Alverto Vieira has studied the case of João Gonçaves Zarco, captain of Funchal (1450).<sup>47</sup> Zarco granted himself and his family a considerable extension of land in Funchal and Ribeira Brava. Other settlers, who weren't given land by the captains, benefited from an initial policy that granted land to colonists for five years, requiring the colonist to build a house and reside there.<sup>48</sup> The idea was to attract permanent colonist that would develop the island.

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<sup>41</sup> Moore, "Madeira, Sugar, and the Conquest of Nature in the "first" Sixteenth Century. Part I: From Island of Timber to Sugar Revolution, 1420-1506."

<sup>42</sup> M. Barreto and R. A. Brown, *The Portuguese Columbus: secret Agent of King John II* (Springer, 1992).

<sup>43</sup> N. Alessandrini, "Os Perestello: uma família de prazentinos no Império Português (séc. XVI)," *Lisboa: Palestra na Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa*, em 17, no. 05 (2011): 2011.

<sup>44</sup> L. D'Arienzo, "La Famiglia di Bartolomeo Perestello, Suocero di Colombo," *Bollettino della Società Geografica Italiana* XII, no. XII (2007): 649–670; Vieira, "O Açúcar na Madeira: Produção e comércio nos séculos-XV a XVII."

<sup>45</sup> J. M. León, "El reparto de tierras en Tenerife tras la conquista: el modelo del valle de la Orotava," *Historia. Instituciones. Documentos*, no. 17 (1990): 1–30; J. M. Bello León, "Contribución al estudio de la conquista de Gran Canaria. Documentos del Archivo Municipal de Carmona y del General de Simancas," *Vegueta: Anuario de la Facultad de Geografía e Historia*, 2015; M. á. Ladero Quesada, "Las cuentas de la conquista de Gran Canaria," *Anuario de Estudios Atlánticos*, no. 12 (1966): 11–104.

<sup>46</sup> Vieira, "Sugar islands. The sugar economy of Madeira and the Canaries, 1450-1650," p.47.

<sup>47</sup> Vieira, "O Açúcar na Madeira: Produção e comércio nos séculos-XV a XVII."

<sup>48</sup> S. M. Greenfield, "Madeira and the Beginnings of New World Sugar Cane Cultivation and Plantation Slavery: A Study in Institution Building," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 292, no. 1 (1977): 536–552; V. Rau and J. B. de Macedo, *O açúcar da Madeira nos fins do século XV: Problemas de produção e comércio* (Junta-geral do distrito autónomo de Funchal, 1962)

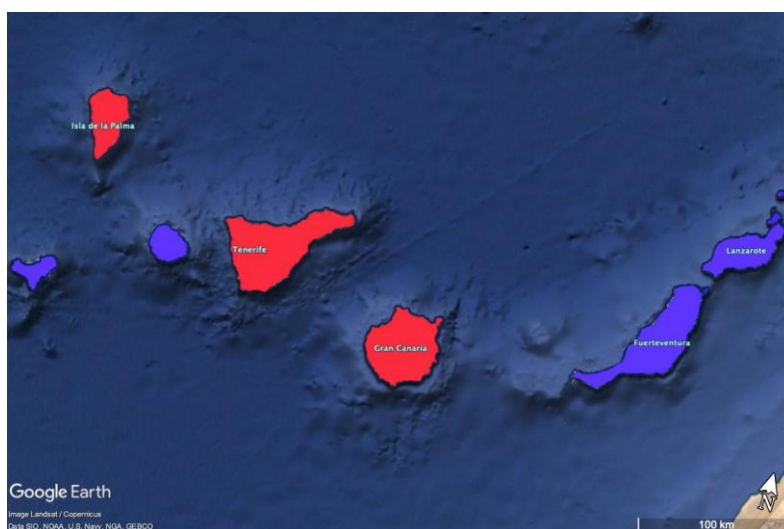


Figure 2 In red, islands product of the *Conquista Realenga*; in blue, islands conquered by the nobility.

On the other hand, in the Canary Islands, on 31 October 1499, an order from the Spanish monarchs to the Governor of Gran Canaria stated: prevent Genoese from buying estates in an amount exceeding 200,000 mrs, even if they had been granted a naturalization letter on that island, so that those who had already bought such estates had to sell them within one year, under penalty of losing them, given that these Genoese possessed more than half of the lands suitable for sugar cane, the island's only resource.<sup>49</sup> But it was absurd of them to claim that by 1499 the Genoese possessed more than half of the island's territory suitable for the growth of sugar. The records of lands granted as privileges after the conquest of both Tenerife and Gran Canaria show only one Genoese recipient - Mateo Viña.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, this order showcases symptoms and sentiments regarding the distribution of wealth and land in the islands and the role of Genoese merchants in the Canaries and the Atlantic.

As it has been said before, the Castilian Crown decided, after the success in conquering the main islands of the archipelago, to deploy politics for attracting settlers through land distribution as well as juridical and institutional reorganization. These policies mirror those employed two centuries before in the Guadalquivir valley, where the Genoese' merits and actions won them a set of mercantile privileges.<sup>51</sup> The aim was to incentivize population growth and ratify control over the land. The Crown was not prepared for an economic leap brought about by sugar production. Also, local governmental structures required monarchs to negotiate with local powers and an ever-growing international market. The local powers, in turn, had a tremendous amount of control over local situations, which the Genoese knew how to maneuver around and profit from. The evidence of partnership or trade between the local governing officers, *contadores mayores*, and judges is overwhelming.<sup>52</sup> They governed and organized the rents of the royal house as well as the whole kingdom. Also, they were the final judicial instance in all matters concerning treasury or state.

In 1506, the Crown sent officials to redraw the distribution of land in Tenerife. Constant complaints from the island's neighbors stated that Adelantado Antonio de Lugo had privileged Genoese and foreigners in the distribution of land.<sup>53</sup> Thus, adding to the previous order from 1499 against the supposed monopoly of land in the archipelago. However, the ownership of land was not the problem. Genoese, in particular Francisco de Rivarolo and Francisco Palomar, had in their hands the most profitable *ingenios*. They did own considerable land, in particular land at Orotava, Galdar, Agaete, and Realejos. Nevertheless, this did not constitute half of the available land (fig. 1).

My research shows that the complaints from the neighbors and the subsequent reactionary policies from the

<sup>49</sup> AGS. RGS. Leg. 149910, f. 57.

<sup>50</sup> Bello León, "El reparto de tierras en Tenerife tras la conquista: el modelo del valle de la Orotava."

<sup>51</sup> M. A. Ladero Quesada, "Política económica, restauración de la hacienda y gastos de la monarquía," in *Las Instituciones castellano-leonesas y portuguesas antes del Tratado de Tordesillas* (Sociedad V Centenario del Tratado de Tordesillas, 1995), 79-92; F. Fernández-Armesto, *Before Columbus: Exploration and colonization from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, 1229-1492* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987); I. González Gallego, "El Libro de los Privilegios de la Nación Genovesa." *Historia. Instituciones. Documentos*, no 1. (1974).

<sup>52</sup> R. Carande, *Carlos V y sus banqueros* (Crítica, 2004), pp. 191-230.

<sup>53</sup> Bello León, "El reparto de tierras en Tenerife tras la conquista: el modelo del valle de la Orotava."



Crown come from an impotent sentiment to control the production and manufacture of sugar. As commerce was the Castilian Crown's primary source of revenue, they always aimed to favor a good balance and maintain a secure supply within the kingdom through basic empiric mercantile principles. Nevertheless, the intense use of land and the success of this Genoese set in motion the plantation economic model in the islands. In turn, the Canaries became a place where goods such as sugar seemed to spring out of nature at a relatively low cost. The consolidation of "commodity frontier" defined the destiny of sugar production on the island to leave the moment land started to become exhausted.<sup>54</sup> However, in the Canaries, the problem came from before the Genoese presence, as the difference between the land concession affected Castilians equally. Thus, the social distinction between the grantees was apparent at the beginning. The land had not only been given to conquistadors but also to regular individuals. The significant difference often consisted in the access to water at the property.<sup>55</sup>

A plantation can be defined by its size, working force, and crop.<sup>56</sup> In the Canaries, the plantations here studied grew sugar cane and received the name of *heredamiento*. Both the Genoese and the Governor Antonio de Lugo from Madeira imported the sugar cane.<sup>57</sup> The size of these plantations is mostly unknown for three reasons: first, a topographical form of measurement at the time was something strange. Evidence of a sort of measurement only appears in Seville (1506), when Rodrigo Cattaneo had his *heredamiento* of olive trees measured because of a lawsuit after a sale of land.<sup>58</sup> Even then, the measurements were not topographical, but by counting olive trees – which takes me to the second point. Value was not always determined by the extension of land. As the aforementioned Catholic monarchs' order shows, the determinant characteristic to expropriate land from the Genoese was its value. Contracts stated the value of land in terms of its crop production capacity, just as in the case of Cattaneo counting olive trees.<sup>59</sup> So the measurement units of the fanega (5 fanega = 1 hectare) or suerte (1 suerte = 28 fanegas) are equivalent to the amount of crop (usually wheat) that can be grown. Finally, most of the time, land was not measured, as it was not a scarce resource. The extension of land would be defined by simply stating its geographical location, like "Valle de Agayte." Even in official documents, the focus would be on the use that the land would be put to, and not on the natural characteristics of the terrain.

One document gives a clue regarding the probable size of a sugar cane plantation at this time. In 1506, Francisco de Lugo, son of Juan de Lugo, purchased seven *suertes* of land from Bartolomé Páez and to Giralda de la Chavega and two more from Fernando de Soria and Andrés González in Tenerife.<sup>60</sup> The lands were not in a homogeneous parcels sequence, they were scattered across the island, yet all neighbored properties belonging to the people for whom Lugo had purchased them: Francisco and Cosme de Ribarolo. In 1506, the process of expropriation against the Genoese landowners in the Canaries had not finished. Nevertheless, the Genoese had outmaneuvered the new fiscal policy by becoming neighbors and naturals of Castile by royal privilege; their commercial networks at the time centered around southern Andalusia and functioned by wide relational arrangements that extended well past familiar relations or even common national origins.<sup>61</sup> Thus, one can argue that the sugar plantations were at least two *suertes* by 1506.

Regarding the workforce, recent studies like the one done by Gamb'in have confirmed the use of slave labor on the plantations,<sup>62</sup> a gap that historiography chose to maintain for years, despite dissenting from economic theory.<sup>63</sup> The production volumes reached on the Atlantic islands were like nothing seen before. Slavery must have been the differentiating characteristic that can explain the intensification of productivity in terms of labor

<sup>54</sup> Moore, "Madeira, Sugar, and the Conquest of Nature in the "First" Sixteenth Century: Part I: From "Island of Timber" to Sugar Revolution, 1420–1506."

<sup>55</sup> *Cedula regia* of 4 February 1480. P. Cullen del Castillo, *Libro Rojo de Gran Canaria o Gran Libro de Provisiones y reales Cédulas* (Tipografía Alzola, 1947).

<sup>56</sup> F. L. Pryor, "The plantation economy as an economic system," *Journal of Comparative Economics* 6, no. 3 (1982): p. 289.

<sup>57</sup> M. L. Fabrellas, "La producción de azúcar en Tenerife," *Revista de Historia Canaria* 100 (1952): p.456.

<sup>58</sup> AHPSe, PNS, Leg. 4887, 1506, ff. 134-135.

<sup>59</sup> Wheat grown in a fanega AHPTe, PN, Leg. 613, Alonso Guitierrez, 1525, 432r. Value land in terms of Sugar cane AHPTe, PN, Leg. 594, 1518, f. 888r.

<sup>60</sup> AHPTe, PTN, Leg. 376, 1506, f. 353r.

<sup>61</sup> A. Mesa, "The Diaspora of a Diaspora, The Cassana and Rivarolo Family Network in the Atlantic (1450-1530)," in *Economic History Society Annual Conference Booklet* (2020).

<sup>62</sup> Gambin García et al., "Especialistas y trabajadores en el ingenio de azúcar de Agaete (1503- 1504).

<sup>63</sup> J. R. Mandle et al., *The plantation economy; population and economic change in Guyana 1838-1960*. (Temple University Press, 1973); E. D. Genovese, *The political economy of slavery: Studies in the economy and society of the slave South* (Wesleyan University Press, 2014); J. Paige, *Agrarian Revolution Social Movements and Export Agriculture in the Underdeveloped World* (Free Press, 1975).

and the environment. The use of slaves and technical supervision, at this time by Portuguese coming from Madeira, were the motors that allowed this intensification and success. In the Atlantic it was no longer possible to carry out a sustainable business under a multitude of unskilled workers. Even though previous studies have downplayed the role of enslaved people in the years after the conquest, the reality is that the accounts state the arrival of slaves in Tenerife to work immediately after the conquest.<sup>64</sup> As shown in the revision of the *repartimiento de Tenerife* in 1506, a witness told the Crown's official that Mateo Viña (the Genoese mentioned above) had brought a ship in 1496 with slaves and machinery to plant sugar on his new land.<sup>65</sup>

In the Canarian case, it is important to consider the geography and biodiversity of the islands to make sense of the connection between the sugar cane plantation economy and the use of slave workforce. First, slavery was not new in the Canaries; Europeans conducted incursions to capture natives early in the fifteenth century. Then, the conquest created the first group of vulnerable population. As it was tradition, slavery started with the taking of prizes of war from the original inhabitants. The geographical vicinity also created conditions that allowed for the import of African black slaves, once that the local population waned. Thus, the Portuguese trade coming from both Madeira and Cape Verde, integrated the Canaries with the first Atlantic slave-trade routes. Second, as the lands initially were prizes or rewards from conquest, large extension of land of undefined limits constituted the norm for the first sugar cane estates.<sup>66</sup> However, scholars in recent years have tried to argue that the presence of slaves and their impact in the islands' society was a 'phenomenon isolated from the social and cultural context of the Atlantic.'<sup>67</sup> Their argument is that the lack of laborers and the need to exploit the sugar cane, as well as the influence from the Portuguese neighbors directly affected the composition of Canarian society. The problem with this argument is that slavery was not a phenomenon unique to the Atlantic. The politics and economics of slavery were not foreign to Castile nor the Genoese, who had been waging war against the Muslim kingdom of Granada and trading slaves from the East for centuries.<sup>68</sup>

Sugar cane production and slavery were phenomena that evolved through the Mediterranean and Atlantic, changing and transforming. The past affected and set the conditions for the emergence and development of the transatlantic slave trade. Documentation shows that a Gran Canaria plantation could hold between thirty and thirty-five slaves in the mid-sixteenth century. These numbers were higher than those recorded for Tenerife and la Palma. However, Tenerife had properties with up to one hundred slaves.<sup>69</sup> These slaves were held directly by plantation owners. In Galdár, Arucas, Agüimes, and Agaete, areas where the Adelantado Fernández de Lugo, Francisco de Riverol, Tomas Justiniano, and Francisco Pinelo held land, which Gambin found evidence of twenty-five slaves working the land in Agaete,<sup>70</sup> thus, creating an indicative of the slave population per plantation. The Genoese plantation economy in the Canaries succeeded thanks to its connection to the southern Andalusian markets and the existence of smallholder farmers who grew wheat and other basic crops in function of the wider plantation economy of the islands. Its dual agricultural economy served for its transition to being a supporting port of the *Carrera de Indias*, once the sugar transaction declined by 1520 and it was overshadowed by the richness of America.<sup>71</sup> In the case of the Genoese economic enterprise, the plantation economy was determined by easy access to land, as has been shown above; by the employment of slave labor force, which allowed them to not rely on the settlement policies of the Castilian Crown, on social mobility, nor in the labor market; and finally by the fact that sugar can function as a continuous harvest crop, which means that the crop can be grown again out of the same cane, at least two more times, if harvested correctly.

<sup>64</sup> Fabrellas, "La producción de azúcar en Tenerife"; Fernández-Armesto, *Before Columbus: Exploration and colonization from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, 1229-1492*; Pérez Morera, *el azúcar y su cultura en las islas atlánticas*.

<sup>65</sup> Rosa Olivera and Sierra, *Reformación del Repartimiento de Tenerife en 1506*, pp. 22 & 148

<sup>66</sup> M. L. Cabrera, *La esclavitud en las Canarias Orientales en el Siglo XVI: Negros, Moros y Moriscos* (Cabildo Insular de Gran Canaria, 1982); B. Rivero Suárez, *El azúcar en Tenerife: 1496-1550* (Instituto de Estudios Canarios, 1991).

<sup>67</sup> Vieira, "Sugar islands. The sugar economy of Madeira and the Canaries, 1450-1650," p. 57.

<sup>68</sup> Ladero Quesada, "La esclavitud por guerra a fines del siglo XV: el caso de Málaga"; H. Barker, "Egyptian and Italian Merchants in the Black Sea Slave Trade, 1260-1500" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2014).

<sup>69</sup> M. L. Cabrera, "Esclavitud y azúcar en Canarias," in *Escravos com e sem açúcar* (Centro de Estudos de História do Atlântico, 1996), 106-112.

<sup>70</sup> Gambin García et al., "Especialistas y trabajadores en el ingenio de azúcar de Agaete (1503- 1504)."

<sup>71</sup> M. L. Laviana Cuetos, "La organización de la Carrera de Indias, la obsesión del monopolio," *Revista de Historia Naval*, 2006, A. G.-B. González and C. M. Shaw, *Andalucía y la carrera de Indias (1492-1824)*, vol. 87 (Editorial Universidad de Granada, 2002).

By the first decade of the sixteenth century, both the Canaries and Madeira were producing record amounts of sugar, around an average of 2,000 tonnes per year.<sup>72</sup> However by 1530, sugar transactions decreased, with the main cultivation sites moving to Morocco and Sao Tome.<sup>73</sup> Sugar offered a tremendous amount of return in comparison to the cost of investing. For example, in 1492, Alonso de Lugo, conqueror of Tenerife and Palma, took a loan from the Genoese merchant Francisco de Rivarolo and the Florentine Juanoto Berardi for a value of around one and a half million maravedis. There is a document from 1494 in which Berardi appears collecting the payment, in which it is stated that 700,000 *mrs* and 150 slaves is the amount owed.<sup>74</sup> Assuming that the loan from Rivarolo and Berardi was divided in equal parts and that the cost of a slave in Seville oscillated between 5,000 and 7,000 *mrs*, the Florentine doubled his investment in just two years.<sup>75</sup> Unlike Berardi, Rivarolo received land in payment for part of his loan, land that he put to producing sugar, and from which there is evidence of gross revenue of three million *mrs* per year from 1496 to 1513.

The transformation of the Canary Islands into a sugar plantation evolved by the hand of the Genoese. The complete saturation of commodity relations, alongside the maximization of the natural context and human labor, constituted a radical change with respect to the traditional Spanish rules of exploitation. In the past, the limits to production had originated from the conditions the land imposed on the workers. The Genoese possessed the knowledge and the means to transform the rules and make labor the first and most important variable in this new economy. Nevertheless, whereas under the feudal order, the availability of resources and the land's fertility were the definer to the economic order.<sup>76</sup> In the plantation economy, the opening of a new frontier and new land discoveries turned fertility and access to resources into regional issues. The ever-growing global-market economy quickly solves any issue by pushing the frontier of production a little further. Moore goes as far as to argue that it is from this context that the first evidence of Marx's law of value can be found: "labor productivity emerged as the metric of value for the modern world-system."<sup>77</sup>

By the first years of the sixteenth century, sugar had become the law of the land. Almost all notarial deeds have the following sentence: "pays with money or white sugar." The option to pay in sugar meant that the inhabitants could have access to goods and services in a more agile way, especially since the Castilian Crown always had a shortage of currency in circulation.<sup>78</sup> It also means that to trace the amounts of sugar production is not as simple as to collect their mentions in the contracts and transactions (fig. 3). The second difficulty is that the amounts agreed were not in circulation at the exact moment of the contract. A large contract like the 1509 property purchase by Luis Guzman, valued in 11,000 *arrobas* of sugar (275,000 tones), was probably paid over four to six years, if not longer.<sup>79</sup> Genoese merchants were able to move the most significant amounts per year, averaging around 600 *arrobas* at the peak of sugar production –fig. 3.

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<sup>72</sup> Fabrellas, "La producción de azúcar en Tenerife"; Moore, "Madeira, Sugar, and the Conquest of Nature in the" First" Sixteenth Century, Part II: From Regional Crisis to Commodity Frontier, 1506—1530."

<sup>73</sup> Mintz, *Sweetness and power: The place of sugar in modern history*, pp. 19–73.

<sup>74</sup> AGS, RGS, Leg. 1101, f. 90.

<sup>75</sup> C. Varela, "The Difficult Beginnings," in *Global Goods and the Spanish Empire, 1492–1824* (Springer, 2014), ff.42–45.

<sup>76</sup> J. Heers, "The feudal economy and capitalism: words, ideas and reality," *Journal of European Economic History* 3, no. 3 (1974): 609; M. Postan, "The Feudal Economy," *New Left Review*, no. 103 (1977): 72; J. Banaji, "The peasantry in the feudal mode of production: towards an economic model," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 3, no. 3 (1976): 299–320.

<sup>77</sup> Moore, "Madeira, Sugar, and the Conquest of Nature in the" First" Sixteenth Century, Part II: From Regional Crisis to Commodity Frontier, 1506—1530," p.5.

<sup>78</sup> M. á. Ladero Quesada, "El Banco de Valencia, los genoveses y la saca de oro castellana (1500-1503)," *Anuario de estudios medievales*, no. 17 (1987): p.82.

<sup>79</sup> AHPT, Leg. 304 Hernando Guerra, 1509, f. 419r.

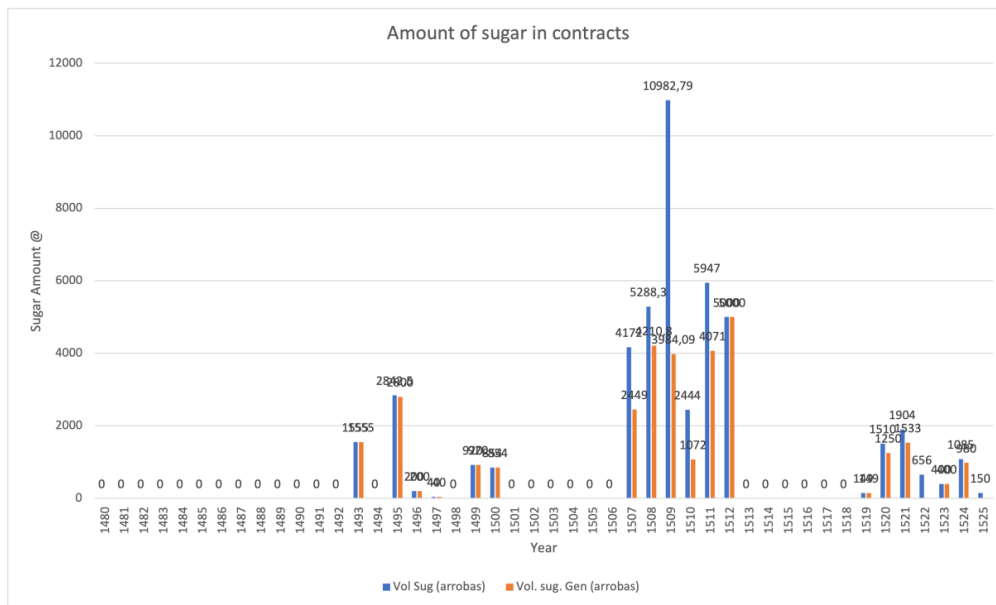


Figure 3 Distribution of amount of sugar contracted in Tenerife and Gran Canaria between 1450 and 1530. Differentiation is made between Genoese contracts in orange and all others in blue.

### The conflicts

The particularities of the sugar business were more than its production in its commercialization. The Genoese chartered most of the ships that loaded the canaries with sugar, which they then sent to Cadiz, Seville, Antwerp, and Genoa, to bring back cloth and other manufactured goods. Merchants paid for sugar in cash, with money, or for clothing, and clothing then meant as well as clothes a wide variety of useful imported objects. From Flanders came copper figurines of *ingenious clavazon* and several Flemish altarpieces that are still preserved in Gran Canaria, La Palma, and Tenerife. Large consignments of cloth from the Lombard industry arrived via Genoa. The uniqueness of these products of distant origin that the Genoese sold made them monopolize their traffic, with the consequent temptation to impose their prices by paying for the sugar they acquired with such merchandise.

The Genoese intervention and that of other foreign merchants introduced the islands economy to the international arena, which resulted in important human and capital technical contributions. This type of commercial activity was not only not a problem for owners of land on Gran Canaria, but also an excellent way to place sugar in those markets where the best price was paid for it.

But problems began when the Genoese, following the commercial principle of cost savings, began to buy and lease land to produce sugar themselves, thus becoming part of the production process from its beginning. It is evident that the introduction of the merchants in the initial phase of sugar production was due to their interest in expanding their profit margins by avoiding the purchase of the product from farmers.

Although this trend of land grabbing was perfectly legal, the Genoese engaged in many land acquisitions in which they clearly took advantage of moments of economic difficulty of their previous Castilian owners. They began to be seen socially at the local level as financial speculators without scruples when it came to judicially executing debts. For many settlers, the loans granted by the Genoese to indebted neighbors with few options for the future were nothing more than a medium-term technique to acquire their possessions. Below I will present three examples of this Genoese *modus operandi*, which sometimes went by way of contract but at others by way of lawsuit.

The first case is that of Batista de Riberol, heir of Francisco de Riberol. the date of 1487 bought lots in Galdar.<sup>80</sup> Access to land, embodied in the distributions made by the governor or his delegates, until then intended for the conquerors and settlers who expressed their intention to settle permanently in the island, and access to the property of what was distributed was conditioned to a series of years of continuous stay cultivating the land. Batista de Riberol, the purchase of two lots of land occurred in clear violation of the

<sup>80</sup> F. Morales Padrón, "Canarias en el Archivo de Protocolos de Sevilla," *Anuario de Estudios Atlánticos* 1, no. 7 (1961): p. 262

regulations that governed the divisions. Although the contract was approved by the local authorities in order not to avoid the exploitation of the land and the need for the authorities to successfully populate the islands. It is very likely that the appearance at this early time of the Ligurian merchant is due to the reports around this time of the first sugar harvests in Gran Canaria.

Riberol's strategy consisted in purchasing small pieces of land from the first settlers. There are records of purchases in 1490 and again in 1492, again in Galdar. It is worth noting that the cost of the transaction was settled in sugar, as was discussed above: "veynte e syete arrobas e media de azucar blanco, bueno e de tomar."<sup>81</sup> Thus, one can argue that at this Riberol's lands produced sugar to pay for the transaction or the contract constituted a debt to be paid in the future. This sort of operation continued throughout the following years. However, in 1497, the governor Fajardo constituted him as neighbour and granted him more lands in Agadar. [p. 272]padron1961canarias In 1502, he described his possessions as follows: "in the said land of Gran Canaria, at the ville of Santiago of Agaldar some lands of sugar cane, some [...] given to him because of his neighborhood and other because of compensation or exchange for other lands he had acquired of persons [...] that he had grown in his lands sugar cane and had constructed mills, which had cost him a about five-hundred thousand maravedis."<sup>82</sup>

An example of the contractual dependency of some of the Castilian settlers towards Genoese merchants survives from a 1495 notarial deed. In the deed, Alonso Salvago states that three high ranking neighbors in Gran Canaria owe him important sums of sugar. Among the debtors' sums, one finds 1,050 arrobas (26,250 tons) owed by Pedro de Ormas, 450 a (11,250 t) by the Diego de Cabrera, and 200 a (5,000 t) by the widow of an exalted conqueror.<sup>83</sup> Salvago sold clothes to the neighbors, who in turn promised to pay with sugar. The owner of the fabrics back in Seville was Jacome Sopranis, and in 1499 he started to push through juridical means the collection of the debts. In Seville, Cabrera appeared in front of a local notary and promised to pay in tribute and yearly 200 arrobas, which he would have had deliver to the mill in Telde.<sup>84</sup> When the time came Cabrera tried to pay his debt by transferring to Sopranis a debt that Juan de Salazar owed to Cabrera, for 400 arrobas. Nevertheless, both Castilians refused to pay, and thus, Sopranis took both to justice which reached several instances of appellation ending in the Royal Chancellery at Ciudad Real. For the Genoese, justice was extremely favorable and by January of the next year a final sentence had found him victorious of the main debt but also of the time of unpaid tribute.<sup>85</sup> However, the matter was far from closed. The justice of Gran Canaria refused to enforce the verdict, which forced Sopranis to appeal to the kings who in turn gave a royal command to the governor Lope Sánchez de Valenzuela to enforce the sentence and cease the goods from Cabrera.

My third and final example of the Genoese *modus operandi* relates to a proclamation of 1498 that foreigners in Castile could not hold properties with a value of over 200,000 mrs. The measure was celebrated by the inhabitants of the islands and pushed to be followed in the islands. However, the measure faced several difficulties in its application. The first and most important of the barriers was that many of the Genoese had acquired from the monarchs' letters of naturalization and held neighborhood in cities as any other Castilian would. The council of Gran Canaria knew of these issues, and, around a year later, raised their doubts and thoughts to the kings, along with a list of the properties owned by the Genoese on the island, and the values thereof.<sup>86</sup> The total value of the mills was estimated at 2,473,000 mrs; mention was also made of other properties belonging to Batista de Riberol and Jeronimo de Oreiro valued at 187,000 mrs. The arrival of this list at the Court along with the council's complaint about the danger of economic monopoly in the hands of foreigners in Gran Canaria, could not help but alert the royal advisers. They resolved in October 1499 to take measures in this regard, and the queen stated in a letter to the council in Gran Canaria: "I say the damage that the said island has received up to now and because it is not very populated, it has been due to the many places that were used to be done by exquisite hands. say that the residents of the said ysla have sold their estates and the Genoese buy them, those who say they have bought more than half of the estates where sugar can be harvested and they work like all the sugar estates come at their hands, and if that were to happen, the herds would be lost because there is no other deal on said island but that of sugar."<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, in order to avoid the

<sup>81</sup> Twenty-seven and a half *arrobas* of white sugar, good and to take. Morales Padrón, p. 434.

<sup>82</sup> AGS. RGS, Leg. 150202, f. 455.

<sup>83</sup> Morales Padrón, "Canarias en el Archivo de Protocolos de Sevilla," p.267. 84. AGS. RGS. Leg. 149909, f. 127.

<sup>84</sup> AGS. RGS. Leg. 150202, f. 455.

<sup>85</sup> Morales Padrón, "Canarias en el Archivo de Protocolos de Sevilla," p.276.

<sup>86</sup> AGS. Camara de Castilla, Diversos de Castilla, leg. 9, N 24. Published in M. Gambín García, *El ingenio de Agaete. Oro dulce en Gran Canaria a comienzos del siglo XVI* (Oristán y Gociano Editores, 2008).

<sup>87</sup> AGS. RGS. Leg. 149910, f. 57.



possibility of the Genoese bypassing the prerogative by acquiring or showing naturalization letters, the queen added that the letters were not valid in the case of purchasing land over 200,000 *mrs.*<sup>88</sup> In response to the queen's prerogative, Francisco de Riberol went to Court, trying to evade these provisions, arguing coherently that he had been a natural by right for many years and a resident of Seville in the same way, and had also helped and financed the conquest of the islands. In the same way, he asked if the measure also affected goods purchased prior to the publication of the royal edict. The answer to these questions would take another year: in 1501 the kings proclaimed that the measures applied to foreigners whose properties were purchased after the proclamation of 1498. The Genoese continued to request and maneuver in the Castilian political world until July of the same year when the problem was considered over, and the Genoese were able to continue with their properties without major problems.

There were many other issues that affected the ownership of land, the commerce of sugar, and even marriage and murder, which affected the Genoese. Some of the other cases have been mentioned in passing throughout this paper. However, the examples chosen here to illustrate the problems of land ownership in the most concrete way.

## Results and consequences

The economic effects of the plantation economy in the Canary Islands were quite severe. With sugar functioning as a currency, the monarchs unknowingly lost control over a crucial aspect of the economy, the circulation of coins. As the Crown had no control over how much sugar cane grew nor how much was turned into sugar, how could it establish a fair price of equivalence for the circulating coins? Also, the Crown did not control the sugar mills, which were, in fact, few. Thus, it is no surprise that some of these *ingenios* became a sort of mint on the island. The same notarial deeds referenced before, allowing payment with sugar, also show the accordance of where the sugar needed to be taken. One of the *ingenios* most referenced is that of the Orotrava, which was first owned by the Adelantado Antonio de Lugo, but quickly sold to Francisco Palomar (Genoese), who subsequently had to give it to the Rivarolo brothers Cosme and Francisco, because of the amount of debt he had. By the first years of the sixteenth century, water access needed to be regulated. Water scarcity led to the exploitation of animal or human power, in the place of waterpower, particularly for the use of mills – trapiches or *almanjaras*. Little is known about the particularities of the technology used at the time. However, thanks to the work of Rebora, and Giulio Landi's description of Madeira, it appears that the system of mills and pressing followed the one that had been established to extract oil from olives.<sup>89</sup>

Scholars have argued that the plantation economy tends to create societies with strict vertical class systems, in which the owners of the plantations receive most of the profits.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, the plantation owners were well-established merchants, direct intermediaries to the international market, and owners of some of the means of transformation of the raw crop. The Genoese had in their hands a virtual monopoly of each step of the production system. The monopoly became a problem, causing resentment from the island's neighbors and the Crown. The unequal distribution of wealth was compounded by the following logic: The Genoese owners of plantations and mills to process the sugar preferred to import goods and services from overseas, for example hiring Portuguese sugar technicians and buying enslaved people. The neighbors' demands for secondary goods, like clothes, were met in part by the Ligurian merchants. Since the archipelago economy was based on sugar production, there were no incentives to create alternative labor markets, especially as manufactured goods follow economies of scale or require a considerable skilled workforce.<sup>91</sup>

In conclusion, the Genoese were crucial in the introduction of the plantation economy in the Canaries. They dominated the local market thanks to their international commercial networks and their success in joining the production aspects of sugar cane growth and its transformation into sugar. Their plantations and mills operated with an imported workforce of enslaved people and Portuguese sugar masters. Nevertheless, their success came to an end when the plantation economy that they had created exhausted itself. Castile responded to the economic reality in the Canaries with measures that were directed against social symptoms and not the underlying cause of the social unrest against Genoese success.

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Rebora, *Un'impresa zuccheriera del Cinquecento*.

<sup>90</sup> G. L. Beckford, *Persistent poverty: Underdevelopment in plantation economies of the third world* (University of West Indies Press, 1999), p. 213.

<sup>91</sup> Pryor, "The plantation economy as an economic system," p.303.

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