



Communities in **contact**

Essays in archaeology, ethnohistory & ethnography of
the Amerindian circum-Caribbean

edited by
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Background image: Detail of feature layer with postholes cut into the bedrock at the site of El Cabo, Dominican Republic, AD 1000-1500 (Photo by A.V.M. Samson).

Back cover, left to right: Artistic, life-sized interpretation of the archaeological site El Chorro de Maíta, Cuba , AD 1200-1600 (Photo by A. van Duijvenbode). / Wooden stool or duho recovered from the island of Dominica, dated between AD 1315-1427. Catalogue number ECB40669, Economic Botany Collection, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, UK (Photo by J. Ostapkowicz). / Clay Figurine found at the Lavoutte site, St. Lucia, AD 1200-1500 (photo by M.L.P. Hoogland).

Front cover, left to right: Map of Guadeloupe published by Champlain in 1859 (Photo by A.J. Bright). / The Trio-Okomoyana village of Amotopo in the midwest of Suriname in 2007 (Photo by J.L.J.A. Mans). / Frontal view of the upper incisors and canines of individual 72B from the site of El Chorro de Maíta, Cuba, AD 1200-1600, showing intentional dental modification (Photo by H.L. Mickleburgh).

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THROUGH THE EYES OF THE CHRONICLER

Adriana I. Churampi Ramírez

This paper is an analysis of Bartolomé de Las Casas's description of Hispaniola in his *Apologética Historia Summaria*, in which we demonstrate that reading this document requires knowledge of Aristotle's *Politics*. The Aristotelian model of the organization of a civil society is basic to understanding the nature of de Las Casas' descriptions. Only a complementary reading of both texts will elucidate the complex western philosophical discussions that animated the apparently simple description of the houses and villages in Hispaniola by de Las Casas.

Este artículo analiza las descripciones de La Española hechas por Bartolomé de Las Casas en su *Apologética Historia Summaria*. Demostramos que leer la *Apologética* requiere conocer *La Política* de Aristóteles. Para entender la naturaleza de las descripciones Lascasianas, el conocimiento del modelo aristotélico de organización de una sociedad civil es fundamental. Sólo una lectura paralela de ambos textos posibilita la comprensión de la compleja discusión filosófica occidental, trasfondo de la descripción de casas y aldeas de La Española realizada por de Las Casas.

Cet article est une analyse de la description d'Hispaniola faite par Bartolomé de Las Casas dans son *Apologética Historia Summaria*. Nous démontrons ainsi que la lecture de ce document nécessite la connaissance de *La Política* d'Aristote. Le modèle aristotélicien de l'organisation d'une société civile est fondamental pour comprendre la nature des descriptions de de Las Casas. Seule une lecture complémentaire des deux textes pourra éclairer le débat philosophique occidental qui a animé la description apparemment simple des maisons et des villages d'Hispaniola par de Las Casas.

Introduction

To obtain useful information from colonial documents, better known as Chronicles of the Indies, one is required to start with a process of textual selection and then perform an exercise in intertextual reading. The first task of the ethnohistorian is to establish criteria to narrow the number of documents. Since the arrival of Europeans to America narratives on this new geographical area and the way of life of the Native Americans has been profuse; around 200 chroniclers are recognized by modern scholars. Only some of them wrote about the Caribbean area and an even more limited group was actually present in the American continent, which narrows the number of documents. It is also necessary to remember that to analyse a text implies reconstructing its context to enable us to place it within its appropriate frame of reference. Distortions in the interpretation occur when we read fifteenth century documents based on our modern concepts. A “city” or a “village” are for us simple terms but they probably did not mean for Columbus what we now understand as such. Texts also have an undeniable historical context; most of our colonial sources were written as an answer to official requirements of the Spanish Crown and have questionable independence and autonomy. This is the case with Columbus’ *Diaries*, which is why on arrival to Spain they were compared with the documents sent by an official of the Spanish Administration, who was posted amongst Columbus’s crew with the specific task of documenting all his observations. In this way the Spanish Crown ensured the presence of a second document to compare and check the veracity of the Admiral’s version. Not an unusual measure if we take into consideration the huge investment that Columbus’ trip meant for the Spanish Crown. Economical, political and religious facts played a role in the production of such texts. Not to mention the unpredictable element of the personality of every traveller or writer. This personality was reflected in their version of the story (let’s just remember Columbus’ certainty of his arrival in India or his later quest for Paradise). The Chronicles of the Indies are far from a transparent description by eye witnesses, they are a construction.¹ The fifteenth century narrative had political, economic, social and religious interests complicating the already difficult task of describing the encounter with a new unknown world. This short introduction is meant as a schematic description of the different elements a reader of the chronicles has to take into consideration before addressing the contents of the documents or beginning the process of deconstruction that may in the end provide useful information.

One of the traditional documents consulted on indigenous Caribbean history is the text of Bartolomé de Las Casas, the Dominican Spanish friar, challenger of the encomienda, Bishop of Chiapas and well known as the *Apostle of the Indians*. Las Casas is one of the most respected sources, he was present in Hispaniola and demonstrated a clear interest as well as an inquiring mind in describing the life of the indigenous population. On the other hand we must not forget his political commitment to the indigenous cause that more than once resulted in biased observations or inaccurate data. The *Apologética Historia Summaria* is

1 The Chronicles were documents produced by conquerors, soldiers, friars, civil servants and new citizens of the new territories. They all described and wrote about America. “Their writing was foundational, their discourse was trying, through the use of words, to construct a new identity for the colonized and his territory, but the point of departure was the symbolic world of the writer” (Borja 2002:5) [my translation]. That is a central idea in interpreting a Chronicle of the Indies. We have to keep always in mind that concepts of history, literature, the use of rhetoric and the texts participating in the exercise of intertextuality (medieval, biblical or classics) are all of a writer of fifteenth or sixteenth century.

one of the lesser consulted texts of de Las Casas, compared with the *Historia de las Indias* (1527) or the *Brevisima Relación de la Destrucción de las Indias* (1552) [both published in 1875-1876] or even his transcription of *Columbus' Logbook*. The *Apologética* contains the essence of his philosophical thoughts about the human nature of the inhabitants of Hispaniola. His arguments are based on the Aristotelian model that assimilates prudence with rationality. Aristotle defines prudence as an essential virtue that allows human beings to distinguish between good and bad, necessary for them as persons but also for the benefit of the community. Human beings possess intellectual virtues related to reason but also ethical virtues related to will and capacity of action, both combined allow humans to achieve perfection in action and in thought. A good way of acting in the world would be related to the capacity of controlling extremes or passions in a rational and adequate way. The objective should be to achieve balance taking distance from excesses. Prudence is, in that way, at the basis of all ethic virtues. Being prudent involves being rational and practical when taking decisions about what is good or bad.

Since the second decade of the sixteenth century the discussion about the Amerindians' lack of rationality and the following issue of the possibility of taking their liberty away was actively present between Spanish academics and jurists. This was necessary to construct a theoretical argumentation to legitimize the Crown's political control of the Indies.

Las Casas' objective was to demonstrate that indigenous inhabitants possessed rational capabilities and were also able to construct and maintain admirable "republics." Las Casas took the most important requirements mentioned by Aristotle to achieve a prudent life and tested their existence in the daily life of the inhabitants of Hispaniola expecting in such a way to prove that they possessed the Aristotelian characteristics for a prudent or a rational political life. We turn our attention to this text because of the possibility that the writer may have began its construction around 1523 (the scholars do not agree on a specific time) which means that this theoretical frame influenced also the documents produced later in describing Hispaniola and the inhabitants.

Las Casas' *Apologética*, is a document born out of the context of Spanish discussions about the barbarism of the American Indians, an idea that provided the foundations to justify the Spanish exploitation in America. Las Casas presented his philosophical arguments against the alleged idea that Indians were the natural slaves mentioned by Aristotle.² Based on his observation of the indigenous cultures, he offered examples to reinforce every step of his argumentation. When he described Hispaniola and its inhabitants he was talking from an authoritarian perspective given by his position as an eyewitness. Las Casas analyses the requirements mentioned by Aristotle and confirms the presence of those characteristics in the inhabitants of Hispaniola. Through this exercise he expected to dismantle the idea of barbarism.³ His descriptions of physical and environmental characteristics constitute the geographic foundation for his model. This is the first of the elements that influence the representation of the Indian's constitution. He describes the environment: the soil, the plants, the weather, the sea, the animals, presenting a picturesque description close to uto-

2 Las Casas reacts against Gines de Sepulveda's affirmation that if Indians in America were barbarians then, following Aristotle, they were the natural slaves so they could be exploited and chained. They must accept Spanish rule in view of their incapacity to govern themselves. Las Casas defended the idea that Indians were able to govern themselves because their rationality was proved by the highly cultural level they have achieved.

3 Las Casas's strategy to dismantle the concept of barbarism is explaining the different meanings of the term. He concludes that only when referring to barbarians as people and ferocious people, incapable of living in society, it is possible to affirm that they will require the guardianship of the Spanish Government (Beuchot 2004:60).

pian paradise, rather than a chaotic exuberant nature.⁴ Instead of standing in the way of indigenous development every element is encouraging it. Climate influences the disposition of the inhabitants and so as a result of such an auspicious environment he concludes that the proportioned and beautiful bodies of the inhabitants can only contain a noble soul. Here he quotes Aristotle's concept that the soul is determined by the structure of the body.

*[...] since all the inhabitants of these Indies, for the most part, and specially the boys and girls, have a good semblance and concordance of beautiful faces and proportioned limbs and bodies, and this since birth, as the Philosopher said, it demonstrates that God and nature gave and endowed and granted them with noble souls, and therefore made them reasonable and of good understanding (Apologética I:438).*⁵

The idea of a savage nation begins to be erased, and any contradictory external elements damaging to the representation of Indian's constitution are counteracted. Having proved that even the natural world helped the American inhabitants to develop their potential, Las Casas begins to analyse every one of the Aristotelian qualities required for a rational life. The idea that a human being has to be able to live in society and be part of a group is the first element. This social tendency expresses itself in first instance on an economic level: by that he means the presence of a house, meant to be inhabited by husband, wife, children and servants or oxen, because a man also has to have possessions. About the house, the Aristotelian principle is that the man has to be able not only to acquire and select the materials but also be able to build it himself providing comfort and security to the habitants. Las Casas has no trouble finding a parallel to these ideas in Hispaniola.

The inhabitants of Hispaniola [...] made their houses out of wood and straw in the form of a bell. They were very tall and spacious and 10 or more people could live in each one. They sunk posts, as thick as human legs in the ground. All of the sticks came together in the ceiling where they were tied with ropes made of a root called bejucos (Apologética I:480).

Once the house exists physically, the next element is the government of the household. The requirement is the ability to supply the means for the family's subsistence. In Aristotle's view agriculture was the most important way to achieve this purpose. Again Las Casas is able to describe how Hispaniola can comply with this requirement.

Of all human capabilities, the most important is agriculture. This implies ploughing and the production of natural products of the earth, birds, hunting and fishing, these are natural resources needed to maintain family and children. All of this they had in abundance. In these islands they find and obtain everything from nature except the cazabi bread which they plant, treat and prepare, there was plenty of this and it was nice (Apologética I:481).

4 Describing the geographic characteristics that make Hispaniola a place able to be inhabited, Las Casas writes: "[...] the positive influence of the sky and the adequate distance of the earth from the sun had resulted in the fertility of the soil and the absence of swamps, stench and other disadvantages. Instead there is a healthy air and good winds making this region temperate and suitable for human habitation and worthy to be visited. It is possible that Paradise on earth should look like that [...]" (Apologética I:355).

5 All translations of *Apologética* are mine.

In third place the administration of the house requires order and organization in the distribution of tasks. Las Casas observed, as well in the case of the husband as in the case of the wife, that the inhabitants of Hispaniola followed the Aristotelian model.⁶ The same order and discipline apply to the case of the slaves because they constitute part of any human being's possessions. Las Casas here faces a problem because he is unable to find a comparable situation in Hispaniola, far from it, as he states the absence of slaves in the island.

A few people in the continent who had slaves (because in the island there were no slaves between the Indians) treated them so kindly and with such love that there was almost no difference with their own kids [...] (Apologética I:484) [Emphasis is mine].

How accurate his observation is and how far Las Casas would go to prove his argument has been researched by David Henige (1992) in his article *To read is to misread, to write is to miswrite. Las Casas as transcriber*. Henige studied Las Casas's *Historia de las Indias* where the friar quotes Columbus's *Diary* frequently to add veracity to his descriptions. The general idea that Las Casas transcribed faithfully and with scrupulous accuracy is questioned in the light of some problematic texts, like the one introducing the notion of Indian slavery of other Indians. Such affirmation would have contradicted Las Casas statements that slave raiding in the Caribbean was a Spanish innovation. So when quoting Columbus' description of Guanahani he just erases the lines referring to slavery⁷. The subject of the presence of slaves is solved arguing that if there were slaves –present on the continent (tierra firme) but not in the islands- they were treated as family. About the oxen, also mentioned by Aristotle as replacement for the slaves, they couldn't be found in Hispaniola either. This time Las Casas'creative observation adopts a well known argument of Columbus: God provided the indigenous population with such fertile grounds that they did not need oxen for agriculture.

People of these lands didn't have oxen to plough the earth, like the Philosopher asserts in Politics and Economics 1^o: In the poor man's house the ox replaces the slave to plough the earth in place of the slave; but God provided them with fertile ground that needed only a strong stick to break the earth and obtain crops, so they did not need to plough [...] (Apologética I:485).

The next problem would be the Aristotelian concept of money or currency (*pecunias o dinero*), something rather difficult to find in Hispaniola. This is compensated by the assertion that the Indians were blessed with such natural wealth that they needed nothing else.

[...]God provided them with fertile ground that needed only a strong stick to break the earth and obtain crops, so they did not need to plough. They had this and all the necessary things for their daily survival [...] that is why they did not need money because they lack nothing (Apologética I:485).

6 “[...] the husband tilled the land and worked in the fields, fished and hunted; he brought wood and other materials to construct houses and buildings, and he built his own house and all other things that belong to manly work.”(Apologética I:481) “[...] the wife[...] made bread, took care of the chickens, if they had them, went for water to the river, cooked, spun and wove cotton, clothes, shirts and blankets they wear and also the *naguas* [...] and the nets they called *hamacas* and used as beds, all this they made with much art” (Apologética I:484).

7 The lost passage is the one from Columbus' *Diary* describing his first impression about Indians in Guanahani, October 12: “I saw some of them with wounds and scars in their bodies. I asked with signs about the meaning of such scars and they answered that people from other islands nearby came to take them so they had to defend themselves. I thought and still think that people from the continent use to arrive here to take prisoners.”

Compliance with the Aristotelian requirements is essential for Las Casas because only this parallel will allow him to prove his essential argument: the humanity of the indigenous Americans. That is why he goes further with another important observation, this time about the requirement of the existence of villages or populous places. To sustain his argument he uses his authority as an eye witness, but then provides conflicting descriptions, like for example the one that would create more than a headache for future researchers: “infinite villages” in Hispaniola (*infinitos pueblos en La Española*). In this case a comparative reading of his other documents rather than clarifying, makes the situation even more complex.⁸ Philosophically his solution is to re-define the concept of a city, taking this time an idea of Saint Augustine. What constitutes a civil community, called a city, village or hamlet, is not the number of inhabitants living protected by walls within a group of neighbouring buildings. Rather the essence is peace, justice and general agreement between neighbours. That is why even when we cannot find villages surrounded by walls or large numbers of buildings in Hispaniola, we can talk of cities.

[...] If the people of the Indies have peace, and they live normally and quietly and nobody harms anyone in their cities, villages and places [...] we can conclude that their republics are perfect and enough for them, even more perfect than other nations which do not have so much peace [...] (Apologética I:490-491).

Las Casas manages to prove his point, the inhabitants of Hispaniola are potential candidates to live a prudent life because they possess the economic, domestic, familiar and paternal Aristotelian requirements. We have also seen how far he can go in his efforts to fit the indigenous population into a certain western model. But we have also proved the limitations of Las Casas’ observations in Hispaniola. Where can we find the descriptions of the American indigenous peculiarities? When do we find the details of the American landscape not contaminated or defined by this theoretical Aristotelian frame? Can we rely on Las Casas to provide us with a fresh, maybe even surprising first look at the unknown Hispaniola and the inhabitants?

What is clear from the *Apologética* is the lack of a description of a structured, unified politically organized Indigenous community. The republic, in the case of Hispaniola, was perfect because the people lived in peace between themselves and did not harm each other.

8 If we follow Las Casas descriptions about not only the dimensions of the so called villages but also how they were inhabited, it can get rather confusing. “A neighborhood is a clan that grows up, from one goes to many, and they inhabited many houses and created a neighborhood of sons and grandsons. As the Philosopher says a city is born from many neighborhoods together” (*Apologética* I:486). In *Apologética* II:524: “In Hispaniola, Cuba, San Juan, Jamaica and the Lucayos there were infinite villages, houses all together, many neighbors from different lineages together because every one of this could have formed many houses and neighborhoods.” Finally in *Apologética* II:491: “Even if in these Indies people do not have villages or cities protected by walls, beautiful buildings or high towers, as long as they live in peace and united, we can not deny their villages, hamlets or cities the definition of such. It is enough that they live together, not much of them but enough to take the form of a village or city, according to the number of neighborhoods, family ties or lineages together, even if there are only straw constructions because that is all they need.”

For this group of beings,⁹ Las Casas asserts, it was enough to live in peace and happiness, with what they already had achieved: lack of chaos. Hispaniola was in that sense a perfect republic because the perfection of a city or village lies in the people living in peace and harmony. To reinforce this argument even more Las Casas describes how the American inhabitants were able to live in peace between villages. Those villages were formed of one to five hundred houses (Apologética II:524) and in each house 10 or even 15 neighbors lived with their wives and children. Even more surprisingly, and an important argument for the civilized nature of the inhabitants, was the fact that in a round straw house, more or less 30 or 40 feet in diameter, without room divisions, 10 or 15 inhabitants lived together all their lives without quarrels or discussions between husbands, wives or children.

But can we conclude then that the model of Indian villages in Hispaniola was only based on the presence of abstract ideas such as peace and justice? To find more information about indigenous communities in Hispaniola we have to make use of intertextuality and jump back to a document from 1516, the *Interrogatorio Jeronimiano*. We encounter, probably for the first time, an official document in which an original name is used to describe an Amerindian village: a *yucayeque*. How difficult it was to understand and to grasp the meaning of these communities is reflected in the number of words used in the document every time the authors tried to find a synonym for the word “*yucayeque*”.¹⁰ The Hieronymite document provides useful information about the fact that in 1516 there were only a few Indian communities left in Hispaniola, since an official order from the Crown determined that all Indians had to be mobilized to cities. The *Interrogatorio* was written by the Hieronymite friars as part of a systematic documentation of the fulfilment of the task they have received: to study the possibilities of an independent Indian settlement in the Americas. The rapid disappearance of the Indian population was becoming evident, so the friars were charged to understand the Indian cultures and restore them. This was an attempt to put into practice the utopia of villages destined exclusively for Indians in the colonies under Spanish guardianship. The friars worked in a very organized way and one of their first measures was to ask the opinion of 13 well known members of the Santo Domingo community. The *testigos*, witnesses that answered the questions were members of the Spanish community: *visitadores* [Spanish government inspectors], owners of *encomiendas* [land and inhabitants granted to a conquistador], people that benefited from *repartimientos* [distribution of indigenous people for forced labour]. All of them declared that Indians were incapable of governing themselves, that they were degenerates and especially that they were unable to understand basic rules of survival: to make profit. Indians did not understand the idea of payment, exchange with capital gain or surplus. They were capable of working in their *conucos* [smallholding. Indigenous agriculture] but they proved unable

9 Being human beings without knowledge of the true faith made the Amerindians also unable to access a certain form of happiness that Aristotle calls *civil happiness* or the capacity to govern themselves and others with virtue. Las Casas established clear differences between Christian cultures and heathens or non-Christians and in such a way makes clear the existence of a unique faith and other belief. But the fact that Amerindians were considered heathens was not a reason to take their sovereignty and freedom away. Las Casas explained that idolatry did not depend on more or less rationality, it was attributed to a natural state of human beings in absence of grace. Following Saint Thomas he asserts that all human beings had an inborn knowledge of God, in the case of the Amerindians maybe still confused, but that was why doctrine was needed to teach them, but this could never be used as a reason to subjugate them.

10 The word *yucayeque* replaces: *asientos*, *haciendas*, *tierras*, *estancias*, *poblaciones*, *comarcas*, *pueblos*, *provincias*, *ciudades* and *villas*. All these Spanish concepts applied along the documents of Indies when trying to describe Hispaniola's household without grasping the exact definition.

to make provisions for the future, they couldn't even sell the bread they produced. We read also in the document that Indians were born and brought up in *yucayeqes* and were only forced to go to cities for work. Accepted and recognized caciques were the leaders of these communities (they even listed the names of some of the caciques: Alonso de Cáceres and Pedro Colón (Wesch 1993:119), don Francisco in Bonaó and Dotor in Santiago (Wesch 1993:125). We also find the description of their labour system: the Indians lived in *yucayeqes*, went to work in the Spanish properties and back to their *yucayeqes*. This all is incidental information given in the context of a general complaint about how easily, when going back to the *yucayeqes*, Indians forgot the beneficial things they learned during contact with Spanish civilization. This meant that they continued practicing their games, *areitos* [music and dance ritual], *coboba* rituals [ceremony of an induced trance] and other practices considered unacceptable in a Christian society. The document shows opposition and resistance to changes from a strong lobby of Spanish interested parties who felt their basic privileges to exploit the indigenous population were threatened. After two years the Hieronymite experiment failed due to opposition from interested parties and the terrible role of the *mayordomos* in charge of the administration of the communities who prioritized their own economic interests, and finally due to a terrible outbreak of smallpox that took the lives of a great number of Indians.

As informative as this document proves to be we cannot reject Las Casas. His documents contain useful information precisely in the moments that the chronicler is confronted with the failure of the parallel between the Aristotelian model and the American reality. It is then when he is confronted with and tries to "compensate" the supposed gap in the theoretical frame that he describes American characteristics. The houses in Hispaniola were made of good materials, they were comfortable and strong, and their simplicity, which otherwise might have been a sign of barbarism, was compensated by their cleanliness, and building materials such as straw, braided into admirable and beautiful patterns *bejucos* [climbing plants of the Tropics similar to the liana] and the nice smell of some of the plants used for the construction (Apologética I:480-481, II:525).

For a deconstructive reading of Las Casas' philosophical ideas these details may sound simple but their presence constitutes material for other disciplines to develop these points and reconstruct an entire projection of Amerindian values, based on the simplicity of domestic beauty described by Las Casas.¹¹

The colonial documents continue presenting a challenge, to classify, to summarize and even to read, meaning that the information they contain remains as some kind of unknown land waiting to be decoded, named and displayed to the eyes of the world.

11 A clear example could be archaeologist Dr. Alice Samson's dissertation: *Renewing the House. Trajectories of social life in the yucayeqe (community) of El Cabo, Higüey, Dominican Republic, AD 800 to 1504*. She asserts: "[...] the archaeological evidence suggests that a cultural aesthetic of domestic beauty existed in El Cabo which focused on the structure of the house. This was identified by focusing attention on various aspects of the lifecycle of the house such as the coordinated, joint effort and exacting execution of house foundations, the monumentality of the house façade, dressing of the abandoned house like the dressing of the human social body and the responsibility to replicate or renew the successful home for perpetuity" (Samson 2010:272).

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