'Pirates which infest that coast': Illicit Trade and Imperial Rivalry in Seventeenth-Century Western Hispaniola

This presentation considers the illicit trade of tobacco and other goods from Western Hispaniola. French, Dutch, and English ships came in the 1560s to trade with the diverse groups living there—Indigenous, Spanish, and African. In response, in 1605-6, western and northwestern Hispaniola and other centers of tobacco cultivation were depopulated. The Spanish forcibly resettled residents, burned their towns, and issued a decree banning tobacco cultivation. These harsh measures, however, were far from the end of the island’s tobacco trade, or of interlopers’ presence. Some residents refused to move, and they were now joined by French and Dutch buccaneers. By 1630, they had several tobacco plantations in western Hispaniola. This chapter relies upon documents in several languages and from diverse archives to tell the story of the Spanish illicit trade and depopulations, the subsequent rise of interlopers who were loyal to no empire, and the eventual takeover of western Hispaniola by the French.

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