Miquel Ballester i Colom - en

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Miquel Ballester, the first man to plant, cultivate and elaborate sugar cane in the New World.

Sugar cane takes root in the Caribbean.

In the museum “Casas Reales “ of Santo Domingo, there is an inscription, which specifies the following: - ‘1505 - sugar is produced by the residents of La Vega, Ballester and Aguillón or Aguílo.

There is also a plaque on the great monument dedicated to sugar cane in La Vega, which reads, ‘Miquel Ballester, ‘the first man to extract the juice…’ which is exactly what the chronicler of that time Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo wrote on p. 6 of his Historia General y Natural de la Indias: ‘…the Mayor of La Vega, Miquel Ballester, from Catalonia, was the first man to produce sugar’.

Monument to sugar cane in Santo Domingo, which reads, ‘…Miquel Ballestero extracted the juice….’

Map of the Island La Hispaniola (today the Dominican Republic)

In a list of the main sugar cane plantations and mills on La Española in the XVI century, which is to be found in the previously mentioned work of Oviedo, it states

Miquel Ballester's Plantations

1514 - La Concepción (La Vega) Alcaide (warden) Miquel (sic) Ballester

1516 - San Cristóbal (S. Cristóbal) Alcaide (warden) Miquel (sic) Ballester

Note how Oviedo writes Ballester's name in Catalan "Miquel)

Miquel Ballester, "the first man to produce sugar"

In Repartimientos y Encomiendas en la Isla Española (El Repartimiento de Alburquerque de 1514), (Madrid 1991) written by Luis Arranz Márquez on pages 543 and 567 are the lists of the native territories and those in charge of them in each town. The book states that Miquel Ballester was in charge of 35 workers divided among the four territories in the region of Buena Ventura.

In the above mentioned book, there is also an alphabetical list of chieftains grouped by townships, and the evidence of orders placed by Miquel Ballester and by the dead chieftain, Adrián, as well as other buyers.

The Director of the National Archives of Santo Domingo, Dr. Ramón A. Font Bernard, told us that it was a usual practice among the conquerors to marry a dead chieftain's wife in order to gain authority over the natives and their territory which was used by mercantile traffic.

One of the first mills or "trapiches" powered by animals force to crush the sugar cane on the Island of La Hispaniola.

Vestiges of the first sugar mill established at Boca del río Nigua in San Cristóbal (Dominican Republic)

The last three decades of his life.

I am very grateful to Father José Luis Sáez s.j. of Santo Domingo for the information he furnished me with on the Dutch historian Harry Hoetink and his work Breve historia del azucar en Santo Domingo, where among other things he says: 'the warden, that tower of strength, Miquel Ballester would do so much more shortly afterwards in Concepción de la Vega', The author of Historia de las Indias, Father las Casas, writes that Vellosa 'managed to make what is called a "trapiche", which is a mill or device moved by horses, where the cane is crushed or squeezed, and the mellifluous juice with which sugar is made, is extracted. It is obvious, however that before trapiches like those of Vellosa, Ballester and others were brought into use, this new type of farming had to be carried out with milling techniques of a much more primitive nature, such as those originally used in Ancient Egypt, which had been designed as olive presses.'

Hotink presented an annex to his work "Notas sobre la población de la isla" It was from a historical collection by Alajandro Llenas in Estadística de la Isla de Santo Domingo (Santiago de los Caballeros), 1875) which makes reference to the distribution by Alburquerque -Pasamonte (Royal tax inspector and later treasurer). It says that 2,824 people arrived on November 23rd. 1514, among whom there were chieftains, Indian slaves and house slaves (nabobs) without counting old people and children. In this list the distribution is as follows:

'To the King's estates and mines: the chieftain Diego Enrique Guzman and 92 people in service (47 men and 45 women)., as well as 4 old people and 7 children, not in service.'

'To Miquel Ballester: resident of the township, 2 house slaves (nabobs) were assigned, as well as the chieftain Adrián with 28 people in service and 4 of the chieftain's children, not in service.'

'To Pedro and Hernando de Medina: residents of the township, 14 house slaves (nabobs) were assigned, as well as one or more that had belonged to Miquel Ballester.'

'To Alonso de Moratón: resident of the township and married to a woman of Castile, 3 house slaves (nabobs) were assigned of those registered by Miquel Ballester.'

The natives served as "nabobs" or house slaves. In the New World "nabori" was the free native who worked in

domestic service and a slave was a person who was owned like property. According to the documents that we have been able to consult, the people that were assigned to Miquel Ballester, were all nabobs.

Concepcion de la Vega, founded by Columbus in 1494, It was destroyed by an earthquake in 1562, but the 68 years of its existence it had become the first city of bricks and mortar in the New World. The Mayor of the Fortress of Concepción de la Vega, was Miquel Ballester, from Tarragona.

The forgotten remains of the old La Vega.

Photos by F. José Luis Sáez, s.j.

Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic)

From the Mediterranean Sea to the Caribbean Sea.

The Milanese chronicler at the Court of the Catholic Monarchs, Pietro Martyr de Anghiera, wrote in 1514 that 'twenty years after the Discovery of the New World, there were 28 sugar cane plantations with their corresponding elaboration systems, called "trapiches" or devices'. The writer Carlos Martí, in Los Catalanes en América, edited in La Habana and Barcelona in 1918 makes reference to Miquel Ballester's first extracting mill or "trapiche", which was in San Cristóbal in the Dominican Republic near to Boca del río Nigua.

One of the latest known facts that we have access to regarding Miquel Ballester, is from the same chronicler of the time of the Catholic Monarchs, namely Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, who collected information from the sugar cane plantations and "trapiches" on the Dominican Island of la Española in the year 1516, making mention of the mill at San Cristóbal, and property of the Mayor, Miquel (sic) Ballester, who was then eighty years old.

This man from Tarragona "an honoured and venerated old man", according to the description by Las Casas, who knew him well, lived on La Española for the last three decades of his life and died on that beautiful Dominican Island caressed by the waters of the Caribbean Sea, far from his birthplace Tarragona, a place also caressed by waters, but those of the Mediterranean Sea, the first that he was to sail on.

Miquel Ballester was the first man to introduce sugar cane to the Caribbean, and the first to extract the honey-sweet juice of which later on the strong, spirited drink of rum would be born.

(c)Ernest Vallhonrat i Llurba