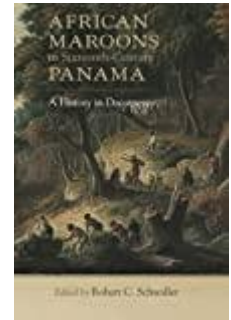


Robert C. Schwaller, ed. *African Maroons in Sixteenth-Century Panama: A History in Documents*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2021. xvii + 285 pp. \$34.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8061-6933-0.



Reviewed by Daniel Nemser (University of Michigan)

Published on H-LatAm (April, 2023)

Commissioned by Casey M. Lurtz (Johns Hopkins University)

On the Archive and the Politics of Marronage

Robert C. Schwaller's recently published volume, *African Maroons in Sixteenth-Century Panama: A History in Documents*, is a welcome contribution to the history of slavery and marronage in Latin America and the Americas more generally. As the subtitle indicates, this history is told largely through primary sources, which Schwaller has selected, organized, contextualized, and translated into English. Historical scholarship on marronage in Panama exists largely in Spanish, and Schwaller aims to make this history—and most importantly its documentary foundations—available to an English-language audience.[1] Most of the documents come from the Archivo General de Indias (AGI) in Seville, Spain, and many have been digitized and are accessible on the archive's website, though paleography skills and knowledge of early modern Spanish would, of course, be necessary to make sense of them. Other sources are excerpted from books printed during the period, such as Pedro de Aguado's *Historia de Venezuela*

(1581) and Philip Nichols's *Sir Francis Drake Revived* (1628). Schwaller's volume thus provides a number of valuable services: it collects a wide array of documents from multiple sources in a single volume; presents them in a very effective English translation; and organizes them into a clear, coherent, and often fascinating narrative, peppered with helpful annotations. All of these features make this book a valuable resource that would work very well in undergraduate and graduate history and anthropology courses and beyond.

The book begins with a readable introduction that establishes some important context for the documents that follow, covering the conquest of Panama, the devastation of the indigenous population, the turn to enslaved African labor, and the rise of marronage in the region. It also explains that this case is unique both because the maroons of Panama are the “most well-documented maroons of the sixteenth century” and because the Spanish response to their struggles, above all the

use of treaties, helped to set a precedent that would be repeated throughout the Americas, from New Spain (Mexico) to British Jamaica to Dutch Suriname (p. 25). After the introduction come the primary sources, which run more or less chronologically from the 1530s to the 1620s and are divided into phases of the struggle between maroons and the colonial state. Each source is presented with its title, date, and archival reference, which makes it easy to track down the digitized original on the AGI website, and carries a short introduction, which provides important context and weaves it into the broader narrative. In terms of genre, the documents include letters from colonial officials to the Crown, bureaucratic reports, royal cédulas or decrees, slave ordinances and other laws, witness testimonies and depositions, census documents, and selections from printed histories and travel narratives. Taken together, the documents tell a story about the rise and fall of marronage and maroon activities in the isthmus of Panama over the course of the sixteenth century, largely from the point of view of the Spanish authorities working to defeat them.

This last point is important. Almost all of the documents in the volume are written by Spaniards and therefore center their concerns and reflect their assumptions about maroons and people of African descent more generally. To the extent that the voices of maroons even register here, they are inevitably mediated by Spanish officials, missionaries, notaries, institutions, and ideologies. Of course, this is one of the biggest challenges of studying the histories of marronage and maroon societies in general, and a book like this one, which places primary sources front and center, brings the problem of the archive into sharp relief. If the archive forms part of an apparatus of capture, fugitive life will necessarily occur beyond its reach; in this sense, the point at which the fugitive enters the archive is the point at which they are no longer a fugitive.[2]

In the introduction, Schwaller addresses these archival challenges with a concise and accessible methodological discussion of strategies for reading marronage “with” and “against” the grain. This discussion would work well for undergraduates, although the lack of references limits its usefulness for graduate students.[3] Reading with the grain, for Schwaller, means reading for Spanish perceptions of maroons as a way to decipher their motivations: why they responded to marronage, for example, in the ways that they did. We could even say that these documents, by detailing the threats that maroons apparently posed, give us an image in reverse of the colonial project as a system, its objectives, mechanisms, drives, and contradictions. For example, something that stands out to me in these documents is the frequent references to roads and the challenge of securing the circulation of people and commodities across the isthmus. Already in the earliest document included in the volume, a royal cédula from 1536, maroons are described as “killing, robbing, and assaulting the royal roads” (p. 35). These concerns intensified in sync with the expansion of silver production in Peru and reached a crisis point with the infamous alliance between maroons and English pirates under Francis Drake to attack, as the cabildo of Panama wrote in a 1574 letter, “the pack trains that frequent this overland route, which, by necessity, carries the gold and silver of Your Majesty and of private persons to Spain and the merchandise that from there is taken to this kingdom and Peru” (p. 113). Such disruptions thus put both merchant capital and the Crown’s finances in serious danger. The repeated references to roads, then, speak not only to the history of marronage but also to Panama’s role as a key node within the global Spanish empire. They give us a sense of the empire as a space of flows and of imperial governance as an art of channeling, articulating, and securing these flows.

Reading against the grain, in contrast, means interrogating the assertions and questioning the assumptions in Spanish accounts, while working

with the fragments they do contain to provisionally reconstruct maroon practices, thought, and forms of life. As Schwaller explains, this way of reading is necessarily “more conjectural than definitive” (p. 25). The documents in this volume, for example, provide glimpses of maroon strategy: burying expropriated goods so as to more easily disappear into the landscape and returning later to recover them; traveling “by the rivers” in order to avoid leaving a trace and giving away their positions; and burning down their own “homes, fields, and fruit trees” before fleeing to prevent invading soldiers from making use of them (pp. 144, 161). (Notably, this last practice also helped to keep descriptions of maroon communities out of the colonial archive.) There are references to autonomous agricultural practices, such as the cultivation of maize, yuca, sweet potatoes, and bananas. Spanish complaints about their hydra-like banana trees—“they cannot be razed for it is a property of theirs that when one tree is cut four or five children spring up that can bear fruit in a year”—speak to the utility of this crop for the maroons (p. 152). A first-hand account from an English collaborator describes in detail how the maroons used expropriated iron to forge different types of arrowheads for different purposes; as a result, he observed, they “have iron in far greater account than gold” (p. 105). And there is a striking list, featuring names and ethnic identifications, of 268 maroons who were presumed to be at large in 1581. The list was elaborated on the basis of the testimony of captured maroons, which may have been elicited under torture.

Reading these documents critically raises generative and timely political and ethical questions that would make for valuable discussion and debate in the classroom. For example, what happens if we read the documents dealing with the negotiations between maroons and the colonial state—the culmination of the history narrated here—against the grain? Schwaller quite reasonably frames the maroons’ negotiated peace with the colonial state as a victory. “In no uncertain terms,”

he writes in the introduction, “the maroons of Panama represent the first successful slave rebellion in the Americas” (p. 26). They liberated themselves from slavery, defended this freedom with force and evaded recapture, and compelled the colonial state to formally recognize their free status. Clearly, these are enormous accomplishments. Yet the documents also tell another story, one that undercuts or constrains this celebratory narrative. For one thing, they indicate that Spanish officials understood negotiations and treaties as part of a counterinsurgent strategy by which to pacify maroons. As a royal cedula from 1574 explains, the defeat of the maroons “can be achieved through one of two means, waging war against them or approaching them in peace” (p. 123). Having poured money into the war strategy for decades with little success, Spanish authorities hoped to neutralize the maroon threat more cheaply and effectively through peace. With the maroons of the isthmus neutralized, they hoped, people and commodities could once again flow freely between Spain and its American colonies and enslaved workers would be more hesitant to flee their owners.

Not only that, but the treaties actually conscripted former maroons into the project of defending the colonial racial order they had previously struggled against. They were required to live in fixed settlements under the watchful eye of a Spanish *capitán general* and a garrison of soldiers and were compelled to work, sowing their fields plus an additional field to feed the garrison, or be punished as vagabonds. They also agreed to serve as slave catchers, hunting down, punishing, and returning fugitives to their owners. We find colonial officials praising their skill in this regard, as in a 1583 letter from a member of the *audiencia*: “When a *negro* flees it is easy for [the former maroons] to capture them such as they have recently done. [The fugitives] barely reach the bush before they are brought back. Because this disturbs the peace of their community, when [the former maroons] find them, they do not treat them well” (p. 253). In 1579, when an enslaved man escaped

from his owner in Nombre de Dios along with two “stolen” women, Don Luis Maçanbique, the leader of a newly established free town, had them captured and “sent them back to Nombre de Dios asking that justice be served on the *negro* for disturbing the peace, or that he be allowed to punish [the *negro*]. He was quartered, and everyone was content” (p. 203). As they came to defend the slave system, some former maroons even became slaveholders. “Despite their own prolonged fight for freedom,” writes Schwaller, “the former maroons accepted slavery as a legitimate institution and incorporated it into their community” (p. 259).

Is this really what “success” looks like? Must the liberation of some depend on the enslavement of others? What are the limits of this vision of “success,” and how else might we conceive of successful struggles against slavery and racial domination? Perhaps the successes of marronage are to be found not in the treaties or recognition of the colonial state but in the fugitive, guerrilla, and autonomous practices that the treaties were intended to eliminate. Schwaller argues that we should not “romanticize” the lives of maroons (p. 261). Survival was difficult, conditions were harsh, and enemies could appear at any moment. All of this is certainly true, but neither should we romanticize the worlds these treaties built, to the extent that they reinforced key elements of the colonial order and the regimes of racialized extraction on which that order depended. To be clear, if I am able to raise questions like these here, it is only because of the crucial work that Schwaller has done in collecting, translating, and annotating the primary sources that make up this rich and useful volume. For these reasons, *African Maroons in Sixteenth-Century Panama* will benefit students, instructors, and researchers alike.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Armando Fortune’s path-breaking article “Los negros cimarrones en Tierra Firme y su lucha por la libertad,” originally published in *Revista Lotería* 171-74 (February-May

1970) and reprinted in *Antología del pensamiento crítico panameño contemporáneo*, ed. Marco A. Gandásegui, Dídimo Castillo Fernández, and Azael Carrera Hernández (Buenos Aires: CLASCO, 2018), 309-77; and Jean-Pierre Tardieu’s more recent monograph, *Cimarrones de Panamá: La forja de una identidad afroamericana en el siglo XVI* (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2009).

[2]. One interesting example in this volume that supports this claim is found in a number of “censuses” that list the names, ethnic identifications, and in one case even physical descriptions of the maroons who had agreed to treaties with the colonial state and therefore were no longer maroons.

[3]. The “archival turn” has generated a vast scholarship, but Schwaller’s categories made me think of Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); and Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: Daniel Nemser. Review of Schwaller, Robert C., ed, *African Maroons in Sixteenth-Century Panama: A History in Documents*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. April, 2023.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=57593>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.