

Pastoralism 1500 CE

Revision of 3.18.16 by Andrew Sluyter.

In 1493, the second voyage of Christopher Columbus introduced the first livestock into Middle America (Sauer 1966, 71). They consisted of cattle, horses, pigs, sheep, and goats that were largely restricted to the island of Hispaniola until introduction to the other Greater Antilles early in the sixteenth century: Puerto Rico in 1505, Jamaica in 1509, and Cuba in 1511 (Sluyter 2012, 12). That said, the Spaniards habitually introduced livestock to islands even when not establishing a formal settlement, allowing them to run feral to provide a source of food for future colonization attempts. Since many such casual introductions have left no documentary trace, small numbers of livestock might have been present on other Caribbean islands besides Hispaniola by 1500 CE.

The livestock introduced on Hispaniola had greatly multiplied by 1500 CE. The populations of pigs and cattle grew prodigiously, those of goats, sheep, and horses more modestly (Watts 1987, 89-90, 104-5). The growing herds roamed the savannas of the Vega Real, the fertile valley of the Río Yaque (Jordan 1993, 66-72). How many of each species and the extent of their grazing remains unknown, but they grazed and bred freely on an open range, with a report by 1498 of at least one herd of 350 pigs (Crosby 1972, 74-76).

The Nature Conservancy's 1:500,000 map of the vegetation of the Dominican Republic provides the basis for mapping the probable area those livestock grazed (Nature Conservancy 2001). A polygon was digitized to include all land cover in the valley of the Río Yaque that map classifies as "Grassland (pastures)," "Rice grassland," "Sugar cane grassland," and "Mixed planted/Cultivated crops." The polygon also includes urban areas and other small areas of various land covers surrounded by the pastoral and agricultural land covers. That polygon, therefore, imprecisely echoes the savannas the Spaniards describe in the late fifteenth century and early sixteenth century. The polygon has an area of 3,271 km².

References

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