Introduction

On 30 September 1812, a funeral mass was said for Pedro Colón in San Felipe Apóstol Catholic Church in Arecibo, Puerto Rico. Pertinent information about the deceased and the funeral ceremony were recorded in the parish burial register, for there was no civil registration of births, marriages, or deaths at that time on the island and the Catholic Church maintained a record of these vital events. Although the entry made no mention of his age, Pedro was eighty-nine years old when he died. The entry stated that Pedro was married to María del Rosario Medina but did not specify that the marital union had lasted almost fifty-nine years. María del Rosario died nearly five months later, on 14 February 1813, and though her age was not listed, we know that she was eighty-four years old. Pedro and María del Rosario had each made wills, which were noted in the burial register, as were the names of their six surviving children: Gaspar, Miguel, Manuel, Vicente, Andrés, and Luisa. While the couple’s advanced ages and the longevity of their marriage were extraordinary during an era when mortality rates were high and marital unions were often truncated by illness or accident, perhaps what was most remarkable was that Pedro and María del Rosario were both *libertos* (freed persons). Each had been enslaved for much of their lives, at least through the birth of their last child in 1768. The life experiences of Pedro and María del Rosario, while certainly not the norm on the island, were not entirely uncommon either.

Marriage and family life were uncommon where and when sugar was cultivated. In such areas, enslaved populations experienced lower fertility and higher mortality rates, and they struggled to establish kinship and social networks beyond the estate. Unable to sustain their numbers without replenishment through the slave trade, slave populations in the non-Hispanic Caribbean were characterized by negative growth. But we now know that greater diversification of economic activities and contrasting conditions of servitude existed. Living and working conditions were different for slave systems in the Spanish
Caribbean colonies than they were in British, Danish, Dutch, or French colonies. Slaves in the Spanish Caribbean primarily lived on open-range ranches known as *hatos*, where they raised livestock, foodstuffs, and occasionally tobacco or harvested dyewoods and timber. Did the absence of labor-intensive agricultural production result in better living and working conditions for enslaved populations in the Spanish Caribbean? If so, what exactly does this mean and what were the implications for demographic and family systems? For those who study slavery in the Americas, these have been difficult questions to answer.

Until recently, we were unable to establish empirically the specific ways different agricultural economies affected slave demographic and family systems. Historians have moved toward the use of previously overlooked sources and underused analytical techniques to recover the experiences of enslaved populations. These sources include ecclesiastical records of the Catholic Church, such as parish baptismal, marriage, and burial registers. The methodological technique of family reconstitution enables us to use these registers in innovative ways to glean information from the past and reconstruct aspects of demographic behavior among enslaved men and women. Our ability to link records of births, marriages, and deaths to reconstitute family groups consisting of a married couple and their children or a single parent and his or her children provides a unique window into the past of a people who left little if any documentation of their lives and are largely invisible in the historical record.

This book draws upon parish registers and uses the methodology of family reconstitution to compute measures of demographic behavior in order to analyze the relationship between commodity production, work regime, and the demographic experiences of the enslaved in Puerto Rico. The temporal focus of this study spans the years of the hato economy (1660–1815) and specifically examines the enslaved population of Arecibo, Puerto Rico, over the course of the eighteenth century (see map).

I chose Arecibo during this timeframe for two reasons: first, the time period of its parish registers (1708–1791) is the longest continuous and most complete series for the island; and second, this period is one when livestock ranching and animal husbandry dominated the area’s economy. My database is comprised of a total of 1,811 baptismal, marital, and burial records pertaining to slaves that I culled from over 19,000 entries in parish registers from the period studied. The proportion of baptisms, marriages, and deaths of slaves in Arecibo in parish records accurately reflect their total number in the community. In 1765, the total population of Arecibo was 3,171: 2,903 (91.5 percent) were
Figure 1.1. Approximate territorial limits of Puerto Rican communities, 1750
whites and free blacks and 268 (8.5 percent) were enslaved. In Arecibo’s parish registers, slaves account for 539 (9 percent) of 5,751 baptisms (1708–1764), 89 (9 percent) of 947 marriages (1708–1760), and 334 (15 percent) of 2,265 deaths (1714–1767). In order to situate my findings within the broader context of geographical variations in Puerto Rico’s agricultural economy and to observe the impact of these variations on the island’s slave population over time, I included information from eighteen other parishes. This enabled me to create a much more complete and statistically significant database than is typically possible.

Three questions guide my inquiry into the causal link between the demographic behavior of Arecibo’s (and Puerto Rico’s) enslaved population and the hato economy. It is believed that few slaves were brought to Puerto Rico from Africa or from elsewhere in the Americas and that the supply of slaves was erratic and limited. The few historical studies that address the slave trade focus on the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries or on the years after 1800. Thus, my first question concerns how many slaves were brought to Puerto Rico in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and what geographic regions of Africa they came from and what their ethnicity was.

My second and third questions concern reproduction of the slave population. We know that better living and working conditions for slaves characterized areas that did not produce sugar, but it has been difficult to establish empirically the specific ways the agricultural economy affected slave demography and family systems. If few slaves were brought to the Spanish Caribbean in this period and lower labor requirements and less regimentation in work regimes were associated with the hato economy, did slaves sustain their numbers through natural increase? A positive rate of natural increase occurs when the number of births exceeds the number of deaths. But were families formed within or outside the context of marriage, and how stable were such formal and informal sexual unions? Assuming that the ability to reproduce is a fundamental indicator of a slave’s well-being, the answer to this third question indicates whether better living and working conditions existed in Puerto Rican communities during the period under study. These queries are part of a broader debate concerning the nature of slavery in non-sugar-producing areas and the characterization of slavery in the historiography of Puerto Rico.

In areas where enslaved persons were engaged in non-sugar activities, families like that formed by Pedro and María del Rosario were often the norm rather than the exception. The evidence I’ve collected strongly suggests that the material conditions of life and the labor regimens associated with the hato economy were less harsh than in the plantation regimes geared toward sugar