

# American Baroque

*Pearls and the Nature of Empire, 1492-1700*

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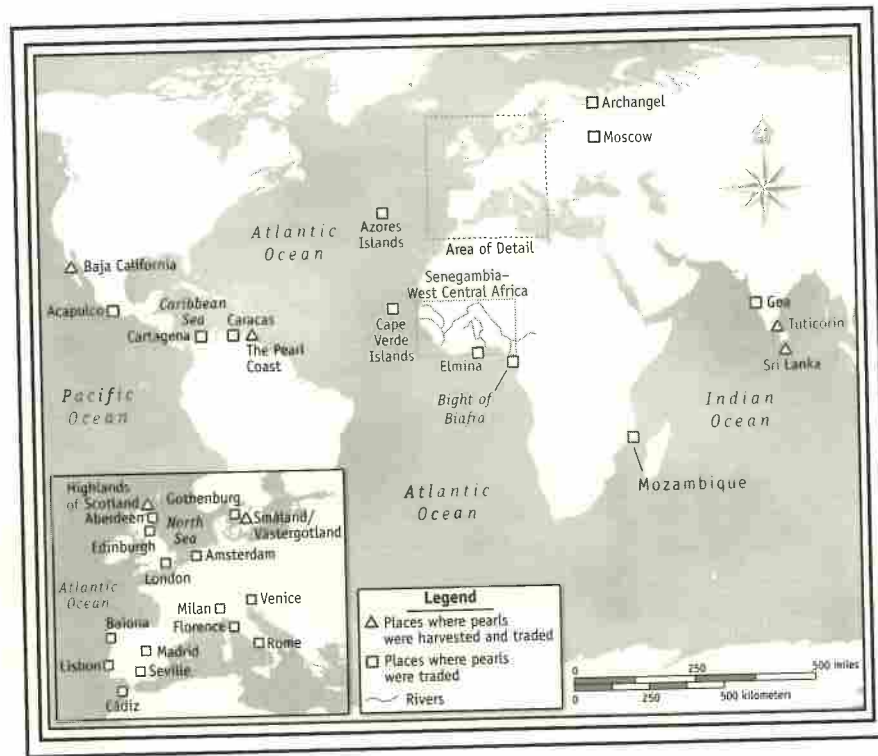
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## INTRODUCTION

### *The Global Early Americas*



Map 1. Select Locations of Early Modern Pearl Production and Commerce.  
 Drawn by Gerry Krieg

The story of pearls in the early modern period could be told as a simple one: pearls mattered a lot at the start of the era and less so at its end. They were worn as jewelry in 1500; they were still worn as jewelry in 1700. But such a story would be misleading, just as the simple beauty of pearls obscures the complexity that produced them and moved them throughout global markets in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The story of pearls is not, in fact, simple. It is baroque.

Today, pearls are predominantly associated with a modest adherence to rules of understated feminine beauty. Cheap or expensive, in pendant earrings or knotted ropes, pearls in the modern imagination convey an unassuming elegance to the woman who wears them, an air of unimpeachable and straightforward good taste. We think, for example, of a strand of pearls adorning a prim, feminine neck. Or of endless rows of the jewel sewn into hemlines and sleeves on extravagant costumes from a distant era. Or of a single luminous earring, enhancing the appeal of the bearer. They are an accommodating jewel: their simple, natural beauty presents no challenges and suggests that the woman who wears them will offer none herself. How did pearls shuck their earlier association with the riot of tastes and motivations that shaped their production and circulation four hundred years ago? *American Baroque* recovers this messier history of the jewel, seeking to restore complexity to our understandings of pearls.

The beginning of this story is a familiar one. Columbus set sail from the southern Spanish port of Palos in August 1492, having struck a pact with the Catholic Monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella for a share of whatever wealth he might find as he charted a new route to rich Asian markets. Less familiar, though, are the terms of that pact. Pearls topped the list of the items he sought; 10 percent of the same was to be his. The crown's explicit desire for this unusual maritime jewel put wind in the admiral's sails as he helped bring Spain's Atlantic empire into existence, and it was a prescient imagining of the wealth his wanderings would generate: pearls proved to be one of the most spectacular products of the New World Columbus stumbled upon. In the decades following his voyage, millions of them cascaded into Spanish

crown coffers and beyond from the pearl-fishing settlements established off the Venezuelan coast.<sup>1</sup>

Why did pearls occupy such a prominent place in Columbus's sailing orders? How was it that this fragile little jewel, this organic product of a living creature, had the power to motivate and sustain visions of maritime empire? The pearl, a vehicle for both value and fantasy, had an appeal that was evident as a lustrous round white orb and, more subjectively, as an irregular baroque specimen, an ungainly excretion that could be transformed by the mind and hands of a skilled jeweler into the body of a dragon, the hull of a ship, or the torso of an enslaved boy (see Figures 1 [Plate 1], 27, and 29).

*American Baroque* tells the history of what people did with and thought about pearls in the aftermath of Columbus's accidental encounter with the Americas. The haphazardly established pearl-fishing settlements that emerged along the coast of Venezuela in the early sixteenth century embedded this early American export in global commercial circuits, transforming the market for the jewel and adding additional complexity to pearls' long-standing associations with the romance and danger of the sea. The profits and problems created along the Pearl Coast (as the region came to be known) drew this corner of the Atlantic world into an evolving geography of imperial jurisdiction, the contours of which reflected European dynastic concerns and the gradual integration of global markets as well as the demands of New World settlements.

Pearls themselves were not a product of the New World, of course. Pulled from river mussels or oysters, pearls were found the world over, although they were associated in the European imagination with the luxury markets of the Far East. In the Americas, European interlopers encountered pearl wealth through gifts and burial practices alike far beyond the north coast of South America. Pearls (produced by various species of bivalves) were fished in several places throughout the Americas, a valued natural resource from the rivers of Virginia to the Pacific coast of what would become Ecuador to the Caribbean, and many places in between.<sup>2</sup> Costa Rica (meaning "rich

1. Columbus's sailing orders, the *capitulaciones*, are translated and reprinted in Charles Gibson, ed., *The Spanish Tradition in America* (New York, 1968), 27–34.

2. For an overview of pearl worship in the pre-Columbus Americas, see Nicholas J. Saunders, "Biographies of Brilliance: Pearls, Transformations of Matter, and Being, c. AD 1492," *World Archaeology*, XXXI (1999), 243–257, esp. 248–249. Brilliance represented internal sacredness and could be found in many shiny objects—pearls as well as feathers, wampum, rainbows, and various metals, among other goods. The particular items of worship and cultural valences varied from culture to culture, but the association of lumines-

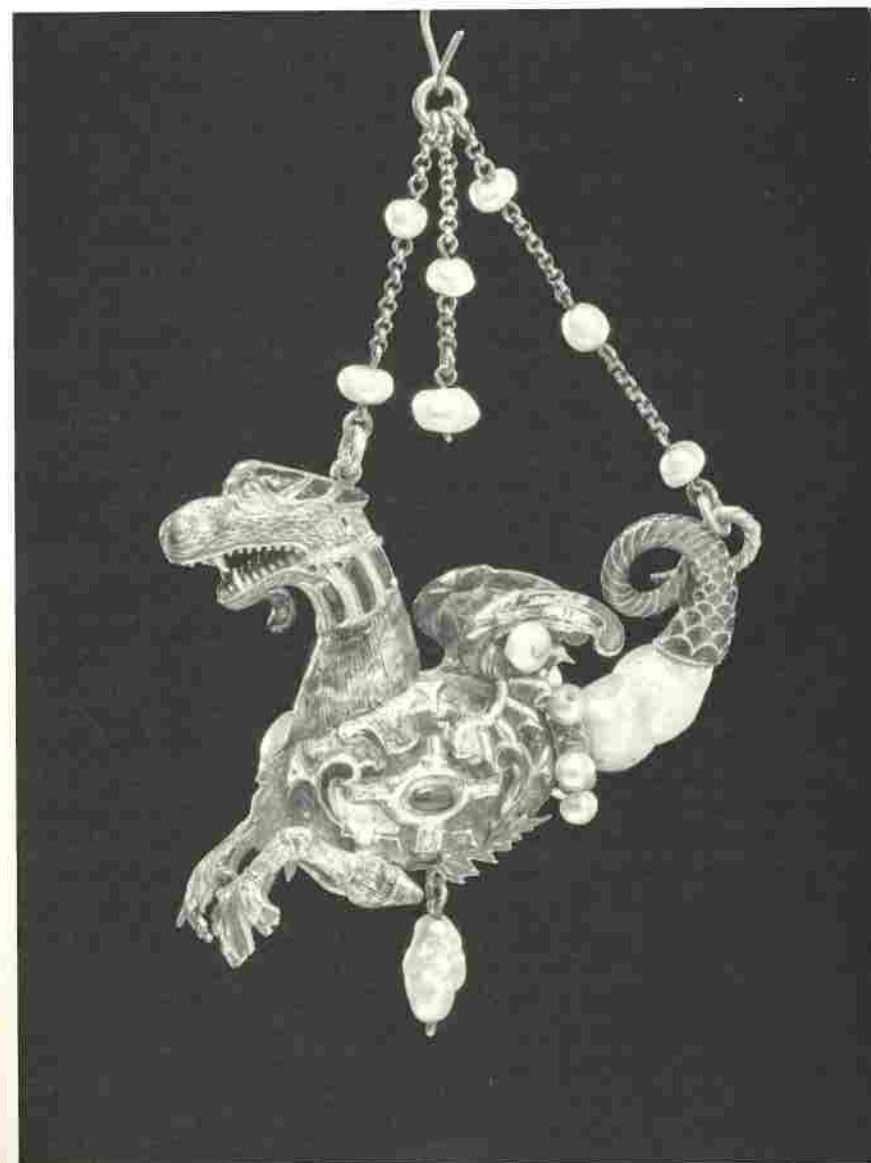


Figure 1. Enameled Sea Dragon Pendant with Baroque Pearl. Spain, late sixteenth century. Permission, The British Museum, London

coast”) was said to be so named by the Spaniards because of its pearl wealth. With the exception of Panama and Venezuela, however, these sites of production would remain just that—periodically and moderately exploited arenas of natural resource cultivation. This circumstance reflected the geographic and demographic characteristics and restraints of the various locales. On the Ecuadorian coast between Atacames and the peninsula Santa Elena, for example, a combination of strong Pacific currents and the threats posed by foreign corsairs and sharks kept a larger industry from developing around the high-quality pearls found in its waters. (Other dangers are revealed by the remains of preceramic skeletons of Pacific coast divers buried near Huaca Prieta in Peru. These remains show extensive damage to the skeletons’ eardrums, likely a reflection of the community’s dependence on diving for bivalves.) As a result of existing indigenous practice and the serendipity of the geography of the Columbian encounter, it was the oyster banks along South America’s north coast that became the site for a transformative experiment in early modern maritime empire.<sup>3</sup>

Although the Spanish overseas imperial mission is remembered largely for its violent and overweening Catholic unity of mission, uncertainty as much as certainty—disorder as much as order—shaped its first fifty years in the

Americas. On consumer demand for pearls in medieval European markets, see George Frederick Kunz and Charles Hugh Stevenson, *The Book of the Pearl: The History, Art, Science, and Industry of the Queen of Gems* (New York, 1908), 18–21. For a comprehensive overview of pearl production worldwide, see Elisabeth Strack, *Pearls* (Stuttgart, 2006).

3. On the Panamanian fisheries, see Alfredo Castillero Calvo, “El oro y las perlas en la economía colonial,” in Castillero, ed., *Historia general de Panamá: El orden colonial* (Panama, 2004), II, 431–456. On Pacific coast pearl fishing, see Ann Marie Mester, “The Pearl Divers of Los Frailes: Archaeological and Ethnohistorical Exploration of Sump-tuary Good Trade and Cosmology in the North and Central Andes” (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1990), esp. chap. 6, “Pearl Fishing during the Spanish *Colonía*.” For an overview of other American pearl-fishing communities established or encroached upon by Spaniards, see R. A. Donkin, *Beyond Price: Pearls and Pearl-Fishing: Origins to the Age of Discoveries* (Philadelphia, 1998), chap. 10. On the skeletons of Huaca Prieta, see Ian Tattersall, “The Human Skeletons from Huaca Prieta, with a Note on Exostoses of the External Auditory Meatus,” in Junius B. Bird, John Hyslop, and Milica Dimitrijevic Skinner, eds., *The Preceramic Excavations at the Huaca Prieta, Chicama Valley, Peru*, Anthropological Paper, American Museum of Natural History, LXII, no. 1 (New York, 1985), 59–76. This phenomenon of eardrum damage is known as aural exostoses. Given the high rate (33 percent) of exostoses among the Huaca Prieta people, researchers concluded that these individuals were regularly exposed to prolonged contact

with the Humboldt Current in coastal Peruvian waters.

Americas. The pearl fisheries that developed along the coast of present-day Venezuela refract the familiar narrative of early Spanish Caribbean settlement in revealing ways. Their history sheds new light on how the components of a New World political economy were elaborated as unfamiliar places and people challenged approaches to the management of human and natural wealth. The history of these settlements underscores aspects of the origins of the Spanish Atlantic empire that are often overlooked: the remarkably early and chaotic imperatives that shaped its administrative bureaucracy and the critical importance of the maritime sphere in these formative decades. Often, the origins of Spain’s American empire are traced to the major mainland conquests that came later in the sixteenth century and that differed in critical ways from the maritime and demographic realities of earlier Caribbean encounters. By emphasizing the importance of the maritime sphere to the emerging Spanish Atlantic economy, *American Baroque* challenges the long-standing historiographical emphasis on the terrestrial nature of the Spanish empire. It therefore speaks to a growing body of work within Atlantic world scholarship that pays attention to the geography of empire, especially the importance of the oceanic context.<sup>4</sup>

4. See Ida Altman, “The Revolt of Enriquillo and the Historiography of Early Spanish America,” *Americas*, LXIII (2007), 587–614, for a discussion of the historiographical trend to ignore the Antilles in the wake of the first major mainland conquests of Cortés and Pizarro in the 1520s and 1530s. For a more recent example of the emphasis on the primacy of mainland developments, see John Tutino, *Making a New World: Founding Capitalism in the Bajío and Spanish North America* (Durham, N.C., 2011). A leading textbook on colonial Latin America follows this lead, opening with a discussion of the major mainland indigenous societies and offering a cursory overview of Caribbean encounters (Mark A. Burkholder and Lyman L. Johnson, *Colonial Latin America*, 8th ed. [New York, 2012]). An exception to the emphasis on the Spanish empire’s supposed terrestrial nature is the work of Carla Rahn Phillips and William D. Phillips, who have worked on Spain’s seaborne endeavors, including Pablo E. Pérez-Mallaína, *Spain’s Men of the Sea: Daily Life on the Indies Fleets in the Sixteenth Century*, trans. Carla Rahn Phillips (Baltimore, 1998). Lauren Benton discusses the unique characteristics of the maritime sphere in *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400–1900* (Cambridge, 2010). April Lee Hatfield considers the unique geographies of rivers in *Atlantic Virginia: Intercolonial Relations in the Seventeenth Century* (Philadelphia, 2007). Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh also argue for the sea as a distinct social and political climate in their classic work, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston, 2000). For other scholars of the Atlantic world who have paid particular attention to labor, politics, and knowledge of the natural world in the maritime sphere, see Daniel Vickers, *Farmers and Fisherman:*

The Pearl Coast rose to early prominence as a site not just of profit but of struggles for control over resources. The fisheries achieved early infamy because of the brutal labor system of pearl diving that developed there amid intense debates about policy regarding the treatment of America's indigenous inhabitants. Furthermore, the single-minded focus on the harvesting of the region's pearls produced an extraordinary assault on the region's marine ecosystem, a sobering counterpoint to the abundant visual evidence of pearls' popularity in the period. The fisheries also revealed early on the interplay between global and local imperatives that would shape the history of the Americas from that point forward. The American pearl fisheries, intimately connected to distant markets through the commercial connections that helped distribute Caribbean pearls throughout Europe and beyond and yet profoundly influenced by site-specific practices and concerns, were a crucible of Spanish imperial administration and an early and enduring model of a global commodity trade.

Why has this story remained largely out of view until now? It was not just pearls' decreasing relative value to spices, gold, and, silver, although within decades of the Columbian encounter these and other global commodity trades eclipsed pearls as sources of imperial wealth. It was also the precise politics of mid-sixteenth-century Spain that led the history of pearls to be overshadowed by other narratives. The heyday of pearls corresponded with the earliest years of Atlantic experimentation, a violent and improvisational several decades. Over the course of this half century, the Caribbean pearl fisheries came to be understood as an egregious example of the mismanagement of human and natural wealth, an embarrassing product of ineffective royal policy. Early histories of the empire condemned this episode of natural and human resource mismanagement, and later accounts—establishing a precedent that would linger in the historiography over several centuries—began to emphasize stories of resource exploitation in which the apparatus of the state was more visible. Industries such as mining and sugar plantations

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*Two Centuries of Work in Essex County, Massachusetts, 1630–1830* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1994); Vickers with Vince Walsh, *Young Men and the Sea: Yankee Seafarers in the Age of Sail* (New Haven, Conn., 2005); Michael J. Jarvis, *In the Eye of All Trade: Bermuda, Bermudians, and the Maritime Atlantic World, 1680–1783* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2010); James Delbourgo, “Divers Things: Collecting the World Under Water,” *History of Science*, XLIX (2011), 149–185; Christopher L. Pastore, *Between Land and Sea: The Atlantic Coast and the Transformation of New England* (Cambridge, Mass., 2014); and Christopher Parsons, *Cultivating a New France: Knowledge, Empire, and Environment in the French Atlantic*

required heavy capital investment that discouraged the type of individual engagement that was so common with pearl fishing. Instead, these later industries depended upon, and thus became subordinate to, larger and more complex sources of funding and oversight. The history of the Caribbean pearl fisheries—the lessons learned and ignored there and their impact on both the nascent Iberian imperial bureaucracy and the ambitions of Spain's rivals for dominance of the seas—shines a light on this largely forgotten period of trial and error. It reveals the protagonism of the maritime sphere in this formative era and the complex dynamics above and below the waves that influenced Spain's initial understandings of the Americas.<sup>5</sup>

Pearls posed specific challenges to the regulatory infrastructure intended to oversee the governance of the Indies' products and inhabitants. The Spanish crown's vision for the trade was both uncertain and contested. The pearl fisheries illuminate the often competing interests of individuals, large commercial networks, and the new imperial bureaucracy, all of which molded the global channels that would distribute pearls and manage the people and the places that produced them.

The American context of pearl production also informed the popularity of the jewel in the early modern period. Pearls' appeal reflected in part the maritime environment from which they came and in part a variety of more complex factors. Pearls were a sensual, enigmatic jewel linked to primal human impulses as well as many paradoxical binaries. Pearls were believed to be the product of intercourse, like humans; also like humans, they were endlessly diverse and subject to decay. Pearls were produced by nature, yet to desire them was unnatural, reflecting avarice and excessive willingness to engage

5. For Spain's censorship of mid-sixteenth-century historians and chroniclers, see Richard L. Kagan, *Clio and the Crown: The Politics of History in Medieval and Early Modern Spain* (Baltimore, 2009). For an overview of the Spanish crown's evolving approach to the governance of the Indies, see Ralph Bauer, *The Cultural Geography of Colonial American Literatures: Empire, Travel, Modernity* (Cambridge, 2003), 42–48. Even Enrique Otte, who seemingly compiled all archival data ever generated by the Venezuelan pearl fisheries, lost interest after Cubagua's profits faded. There is a growing interdisciplinary interest in historicizing the oceans and considering people as ecological actors who both observed and altered the changing sea. The January 2013 (XVIII) issue of *Environmental History* is a dedicated “Marine Forum”; see also W. Jeffrey Bolster, *The Mortal Sea: Fishing the Atlantic in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, Mass., 2012). For interest in historicizing marine ecologies, see Loren McClenachan, Francesco Ferretti, and Julia K. Baum, “From Archives to Conservation: Why Historical Data Are Needed to Set Baselines for Marine Animals and Ecosystems,” *Conservation Letters*, V (2012), 349–359.

in risky behavior. They were known for their simple beauty, but complex ecologies and commercial circuits produced them and made them available to consumers. Pearls could evoke purity as well as moral corruption. And they constituted a repository of value that itself was highly variable and subjectively determined. That the primary Caribbean pearl-fishing settlements were located on islands—long seen as sites of experimentation and aberration—further enhanced the drama and romance that attended the jewel in the European imagination.<sup>6</sup>

Over the course of six chapters, this book moves chronologically through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, tracing the history of these American settlements and the enduring appeal of pearls within a global Iberian imperial context. It further considers pearls' appeal and prominence in northern European experiments to expand the authority of centralizing governments on frontiers near and far. In doing so, *American Baroque* argues that the political economy of pearls gave rise to a productive tension between vernacular, small-scale understandings of wealth management (in which nature and expert labor played a major role, as did pearls' particular qualities) and developing imperial understandings of the same.

Pearls enabled a wide range of people to participate in the construction of and resistance to the regulatory state. The relationship between personal and imperial initiative was not one of constant antagonism but rather a mixture of intersection and divergence. Recognizable and successful elements of Iberian imperial identity existed alongside non-Iberian knowledge and praxis that were central to pearls' production and circulation. These semi-independent components included indigenous American knowledge of oyster reefs in Venezuela, enslaved Africans' practices of pearl harvesting and distribution, and the diversity of participants in Sri Lanka's booming pearl-fishery markets.<sup>7</sup>

6. For an overview of the romance and associations of islands in the European imagination, see Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty*, chap. 4. See also Elvira Pulitano, *Transnational Narratives from the Caribbean: Diasporic Literature and the Human Experience* (New York, 2016).

7. The small-scale and domestic uses of pearls echo the scholarly emphasis on the household as the place of elaboration of empire. See, for example, the articles in the forum "Centering Families in Atlantic Histories" in *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., LXX (2013); Susanah Shaw Romney, *New Netherland Connections: Intimate Networks and Atlantic Ties in Seventeenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2014); and Daniel Livesay, *Children of Uncertain Fortune: Mixed-Race Jamaicans in Britain and the Atlan-*

Pearls allow us to see the connections between the way empire was envisioned by monarchs, experienced at sea and on the ground by individuals, and enacted in law. The stories generated by this unusual, organic jewel range globally, crossing geographic and imperial boundaries and, perhaps more importantly, moving across scales, linking the bounded experiences of individuals to the legacy of imperial bureaucratic elaboration. They illuminate the intersection of these micro- and macrohistorical processes.

Around the globe, monarchs and merchants, enslaved African divers in the Caribbean and Scottish and Swedish yeoman living alongside cold northern European rivers, widows in Amsterdam and accused witches in Cartagena gathered, stole, sold, and wore pearls in ways that reflected the constraints and opportunities of the worlds they lived in. In an era when empires were creating their governing infrastructure for channeling human and material wealth, people used pearls in ways that helped to refine these imperial structures. The collected microhistories in this book reveal how a diverse body politic subjected the changing apparatus of imperial governance—to which they themselves were literally subject—to continual tests of utility.

The irregularity of pearls—their multiple shapes and sizes and the unpredictable appeal or use of any given one—underscored the related irregularity of subjects themselves, as it was the independent judgment of subjects that assessed pearls' quality and their independent actions that decided what to do with them, moving them neatly through imperial channels of taxation, hiding them for private trade, or transforming them into jewels. Qualitative, evaluative language would play a prominent role in crown officials' attempts to impose order on this irregularity. Of the vocabulary that circulated to describe pearls, intended to facilitate imperial control of the jewel, the distinct fate of two of these descriptive words illustrates well the enduring lesson of the American pearl boom, born of this early Spanish experiment in administering New World wealth. *Elenco*, first used by the central classical authority on pearls, Pliny the Elder, to describe an elongated pearl, came to mean in Spanish "catalog" or "index"—reflecting the very ordering impulse that pearls prompted. Another word employed in the early Caribbean fisheries for taxation purposes, *barrueca*, or "baroque" in English, which signified an irregular pearl, also lost its close association with the jewel but came to stand for the defiance of this imagined order, an extravagant expression of independence of imagination.<sup>8</sup>

8. The *Diccionario de la lengua española*, published by the Real Academia Española, <http://dle.rae.es/?id=59UHRsI>, defines *barrueco* as a word of unknown origin, meaning an irregular pearl. They offer the word for wart, *verruca*, as a possible source, as did the

In their reliance on language to bring precision to administrative approaches to the management of complex wealth, the Iberian monarchies drew on well-established nuanced vocabularies of color that were used to describe enslaved people in medieval Iberia. The cultivation of pearls and the exploitation of people, and the complexity posed by subjects and objects each, would be intertwined in the history of this unusual commodity trade as the independence of action and of taste helped create the settlements and the products derived from them.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, from the Pearl Coast of South America to English port towns to the shores of Sri Lanka, pearls traveled promiscuously from hand to hand, defying efforts at containment, from customs regulations to border patrols. On the Pearl Coast, pearls circulated as a result of the labor of increasingly large and autonomous crews of enslaved African divers, and their use on land reflected the assessments and needs of Pearl Coast residents rather than the fiscal imperatives and directives of the crown. In Europe and India, pearls greased the wheels of private financial transactions and diplomatic negotiations, providing ways for women to engage with a male-dominated marketplace and for men to affirm alliances of friendship that served to insulate them from the vagaries of political and economic fortune. In spite of a general consensus about the qualities that made a particular pearl better than any other (the larger, whiter, and more lustrous, the better), the appeal or worth of any particular pearl depended upon the context in which it was evaluated and the use to which it was to be put. These qualities made it impossible to standardize the use of pearls as currency and allowed subjects of distinct polities to use pearls as they saw fit.

In *American Baroque's* discussion of locally elaborated political economies—shaped by ecologies, labor regimes, and real and imagined distances from commercial and political centers—the book reveals global webs of concerns and practices that shaped early modern empires. These vernacular customs limited the success of familiar early modern governing mechanisms to

sixteenth-century Spanish lexicographer Covarrubias. See Sebastián de Covarrubias Horozco, *Tesoro de la lengua Castellana o Española*, ed. Ignacio Arellano and Rafael Zafra (Pamplona, Navarra, Spain, 2006). For a scholarly overview of the various hypotheses regarding the word's origins, see "Baroque, New World Baroque, Neobaroque: Categories and Concepts," in Lois Parkinson Zamora and Monika Kaup, eds., *Baroque New Worlds: Representation, Transculturation, Counterconquest* (Durham, N.C., 2010), 2–3.

9. For an overview of terms for enslaved peoples in medieval Iberia, see Debra Blumenthal, *Enemies and Familiars: Slavery and Mastery in Fifteenth-Century Valencia*

extend control over wealth production, such as patents, monopolies, technology, and joint-stock companies. In the case of pearls, these mechanisms failed because of the expert human knowledge needed to mediate the interaction between nature and the state.<sup>10</sup>

The irregularity of many transactions involving pearls, as well as the irregularity of pearls themselves (embodied by the baroque pearl but represented by the jewel's immense natural variety), reveals the chaos of the practices and assessments that were central to early modern bureaucracies. The global pearl microhistories traced by *American Baroque* illuminate the tension between the imperial impulse to order and contain and the ungovernable motives and actions of independent subjects. These microhistories further suggest that it was practice with pearls, as well as the irregular beauty of the baroque pearl, that informed the potency of the word *baroque* as a metaphor for unbounded forms of expression.

Pearls did not emerge organically from the shells that contained them; they were pulled from their aqueous origins with varying degrees of violence. Their movement from river and ocean beds into individual hands and the swirl of global commodities markets and imperial coffers was a human production, dictated by subjective taste and fashion as much as by imperial edicts, the imperatives of tax officials, and the brutal greed of putative slaveowners. But the concept of the baroque—the association of the irregular shape of the baroque pearl with the unwieldy extravagance of art, literature, and early modern monarchy itself—was organic indeed. Pearls' enduring legacy, particularly in the long life of the term *baroque* as a metaphor for irregularity in form and function, was an unsurprising by-product of the jewel's similarly irregular early modern history. From heaps of shells on island beaches and rivers' edges to voyages large and small—in pockets, on jewelry, tucked into letters, and sewn into sleeves—*American Baroque* traces pearls' jagged global paths. In doing so, this book heeds Baroque scholar Irleamar Chiampi's call to rescue "that tired irregular pearl from such lengthy isolation."<sup>11</sup>

10. For a later consideration of the role of the natural world in political economic thought, see Fredrik Albritton Jonsson, *Enlightenment's Frontier: The Scottish Highlands and the Origins of Environmentalism* (New Haven, Conn., 2013).

11. See Chiampi, *Barroco y modernidad*, 43: "Cansada esa perla irregular de tan largo ostracismo." Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Spanish are mine. The literature on the concept of the baroque is enormous and spans multiple fields of study. The classic work is José Antonio Maravall, *Culture of the Baroque: Analysis of a Historical Structure*, trans. Terry Cochran (Minneapolis, Minn., 1986), originally published in 1975. Maravall argued that the baroque was a historical structure that was international in nature.