

1 Introduction

Tiān gāo huángdì yuǎn. [The sky is high and the emperor is far away.]
—Chinese proverb

Besides, interesting things happen along borders – transitions – not in the middle where everything is the same. —Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash*

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the Atlantic world was rife with revolutionary fervor and political turmoil. With such upheaval came unparalleled opportunities. Naval officers and privateers, smugglers and seafaring traders, escaped slaves and free people of color all found themselves passing through the busy harbors of the Caribbean in pursuit of profit, freedom, glory, or any number of other ambitions. At the heart of this traffic were the Leeward Islands, an archipelago of small islands in the northeastern Caribbean.¹ These islands represented numerous different European polities, and they exhibited a peculiar type of trans-imperial interconnectedness, characterized by intricate networks of actors and institutions that crossed formal political and legal boundaries. The end of the American Revolutionary War in 1783 refashioned the geopolitical landscape of the Western Atlantic, and many of the Leeward Islands saw new opportunities for trade and prosperity as a consequence. Their role as ports located at the maritime center of transatlantic commerce, transportation, and communication became increasingly prominent, and many of them were to occupy unique positions of regional and oceanic significance during this period.

St. Thomas, a small colony at the heart of the Danish West Indies, and the Swedish island of St. Barthélemy became the preferred ports of call for

¹ The geographical demarcation of the Lesser Antilles into Leeward and Windward Islands is a matter of some contention, primarily stemming from different usage in, on the one hand, English and, on the other, French, Spanish, and Dutch. In this book I use the common English definition of the Leeward Islands as stretching from the Virgin Islands in the north to Dominica in the south, while fully acknowledging its origin as a British imperial designation. See Helmut Blume, *The Caribbean Islands* (London: Longman, 1974), 5–6. Further aspects of my definition of the region are discussed later in this chapter.

2 Introduction

ships passing through the region with a variety of licit and illicit goods, from privateer loot to smuggled luxury items to illegally traded slaves. British Tortola became the seat of an important prize court in the region's complex web of inter-imperial legal regimes, often luring ships out of their way to bring prizes and legal disputes to that island. White colonial elites on the islands shared a common and increasing fear of the African and Afro-Caribbean slave populations living among them, and on whose backs they had built much of their fortunes. This book turns the lens on these islands in order to illuminate hitherto unexplored characteristics of imperial rule and colonial practice during what C. A. Bayly has aptly termed the first age of global imperialism.² No empire existed in a vacuum. By investigating a particular colonial borderland from multiple perspectives at once, we can more clearly see that the entangled and boundary-crossing nature of regional interactions was not an aberrant challenge to imperial rule but an inherent feature of colonial practice.

On a theoretical level, the book presents a framework for analyzing a particular type of interpolity space: the inter-imperial microregion. This phenomenon goes beyond the specific geographical area analyzed in this book, and can be found across the globe during the period of European overseas expansion. The framework encompasses a number of different elements, including political, legal, social, and economic factors, as well as geography, and provides an analytical ideal-type that is pertinent to a variety of historical contexts. This ideal-type draws on recent scholarship in the study of empire, on theoretical innovations stemming from the practice turn in international relations, and on the sociological concept of analytic relationalism.

On a historical level, the book analyzes how cross-imperial practices such as contraband trade, slavery, and opportunistic privateering shaped and defined the Leeward Islands as a politically polyglot zone of thin sovereignty and local integration, characterized more by the interests of intercolonial networks than by those of imperial or national actors. The analysis shows that the Leewards were both geographically and figuratively at the center of early nineteenth-century imperial concerns. Functioning as a microcosm of intra- and inter-imperial relations, the islands serve to illuminate the wider dynamics of overseas empires during this volatile period and to highlight some of the broader historical developments shaping the first half of the highly transformative nineteenth century: the struggle over slavery and the threat of revolution, the tensions between colonial sovereignty and imperial jurisdiction, the

² C. A. Bayly, "The First Age of Global Imperialism, c. 1760–1830," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 26:2 (1998): 28–47.

expansion of free trade regimes and the challenges of illicit commerce, and the rise of British interpolity hegemony. Crucially, the analysis underscores the unique role played by smaller imperial powers, such as Sweden and Denmark-Norway, within the dynamics of inter-imperial relations in general, and in the process of nineteenth-century British ascendancy in particular. These small empires functioned in ways very different from their larger regional neighbors, with their colonial territories sometimes acting as buffer zones between rival powers and sometimes as political proxies, although they often turned out to be harder to control than their French or British allies hoped.

Spatial and Temporal Scope

Chronologically, the book spans the period from the end of the American Revolutionary War in 1783 to the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies in 1834. These dates signify more than just geopolitical or economic shifts within the Anglophone Atlantic, coinciding with several trajectories in the wider region. The end of the war paralleled and in some ways caused several shifts in the balance between the European colonial powers in the Caribbean: the sacking of Dutch St. Eustatius by British forces began the steady decline of one of the most important centers of trade and transshipment in the Western Caribbean; the emergence of an independent United States and the economic cold war between Britain and her former colonies gave neutral islands in the region new opportunities to profit from the trade restrictions of their larger neighbors; the French and Haitian Revolutions, arguably already on the horizon in the early 1780s, placed the entire region in an increased state of anxiety and, in some cases, led to other armed uprisings; and, as issues of slavery and abolition became gradually more central to political debate in the European metropolises, the West Indian islands came under greater scrutiny of imperial administrators and political reformers.

At the other end of the period covered by the book, the first abolition of slavery in the British West Indies in 1834 had causes and consequences that went well beyond the British Empire. By the 1830s the decline in the plantation economies of the sugar-producing islands was apparent to most economic observers. The forced migration of labor from Africa was gradually being replaced by a new importation of workers from South Asia. British naval hegemony, already emergent half a century earlier, was now a fact of political life in the Atlantic. And the era of widespread privateering, which had been important not just in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars but also in the clashes over Latin American independence, had finally reached its end.

4 Introduction

The story told takes place within two larger historical narratives of periodization. The first is that of the long nineteenth century, perhaps one of the most transformative centuries in human history. The second is the period from roughly 1760 to 1830, referred to by Bayly as the first age of global imperialism, as mentioned above. While a multitude of scholars regard the longer nineteenth century as an era of significant and far-reaching transitions, the first age of global imperialism has received comparatively less attention.³ Although it in some ways overlaps with the older conception of an “age of revolutions,” the notion of a first age of global imperial expansion goes well beyond the typically rather narrow Atlantic scope of a focus on political revolution.⁴ The concept emphasizes, on the one hand, the worldwide spread of European overseas empires, either through direct colonization or through other commercial and political activities, and, on the other hand, the increasing importance of global flows and connectivity as forces shaping the course of history. One can argue that the early nineteenth century was the first period in which *the global* as a concept had a real role to play on the historical stage.⁵

³ The paradigmatic work on the long nineteenth century is Eric Hobsbawm’s famous trilogy, beginning with *The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789–1848* (London: Abacus, 1962). Newer accounts include C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004); Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity and the Making of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁴ See, for example, R. R. Palmer, *The Age of Democratic Revolution*, vols. 1 and 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959 and 1964); Wim Klooster, *Revolutions of the Atlantic World: A Comparative History* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Bernard Cottret, “La révolution atlantique, une question mal posée?,” in *Cosmopolitismes, patriotismes, Europe et Amériques, 1773–1802*, ed. Mark Bélissa and Bernard Cottret (Rennes: Perséides, 2005), 183–98. A notable exception is David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, eds., *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c. 1760–1840* (New York: Palgrave). See also Armitage, “Foreword,” in Palmer, *The Age of Democratic Revolution* (new edition) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), xv–xxii.

⁵ The issue of dating globalization is a hotly contested one. For general overviews, see Michael Lang, “Globalization and Its History,” *Journal of Modern History* 78:4 (2006): 899–931; Jürgen Osterhammel and Niels Petersson, *Globalization: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). For arguments for placing its inception in the sixteenth or seventeenth century, rather than in the nineteenth, see Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974); Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International Systems in World History: Remaking the Study of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Dennis O. Flynn and Arturo Giraldez, “Path Dependence, Time Lags and the Birth of Globalization: A Critique of O’Rourke and Williamson,” *European Review of Economic History* 8(1) (2004): 81–108; Timothy Brook, *Vermeer’s Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007). For critiques of the concept of globalization all together, see, in particular, Paul Hirst and Grahame Thompson, *Globalization in Question: The International Economy and the Possibilities of Governance*

I argue that this early globalization did not take the same shape as what we might now think of as global connectivity. Rather, it emanated from increasingly integrated regional spaces, composed of layered networks of trans-polity connections and activity – from tightly knit maritime microregions at the local level to transoceanic migratory and commercial flows on the global level. A study of early globalization is a study of networks within networks – of both the interdependence and integration of locally anchored regional actors and the influence of larger global forces on them.

The book presents an analysis of one such microregion – that of the Leeward Islands in the Caribbean – by exploring a specific set of processes. Rather than paying equal attention to the entirety of the archipelago, the analysis focuses on three islands, or groups of islands, in particular: the British Virgin Islands, the Danish Virgin Islands, and Swedish St. Barthélemy. There are important analytical reasons for focusing on these colonies. They were all key nodes in the commercial and legal inter-imperial networks of the Caribbean in general and of the Leeward Islands in particular, and none of them has received much attention in the scholarly literature. What is more, they represent two smaller imperial players in the global arena – the Swedish and Danish-Norwegian empires – that have been all but overlooked by anyone outside the national histories of those countries but that played critical roles during the period of British ascendancy. Although the historical narrative is focused on the Leeward Islands in particular, it is not limited to them, and when historical events or connections call for it, the analysis expands to a number of other regional players, including Caribbean colonies of the Dutch, French, and Spanish empires as well as Haiti and the newly independent republics of the continental Americas.

Scholars engaged in transnational historical research, especially in the study of borderlands, find themselves faced with a dual challenge of comparison. On the one hand, if the topic is truly transnational – that is to say, if it spans the formal borders of multiple polities – then it will almost unavoidably call into question the traditionally accepted boundaries of state-level units, making it hard to justify a comparative analysis focused on those units.⁶ On the other hand, the people inhabiting the

(Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996); Frederick Cooper, “What Is the Concept of Globalization Good For? An African Historian’s Perspective,” *African Affairs* 100:399 (2001): 189–213.

⁶ See, for example, Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmerman, “Beyond Comparison: *Histoire Croisée* and the Challenge of Reflexivity,” *History and Theory* 45:1 (2006): 30–50. For an argument for the compatibility between comparison and entanglement, see Jürgen Kocka, “Comparison and Beyond,” *History and Theory* 42:1 (2003): 39–44.

6 Introduction

historical spaces very likely made similar comparisons themselves – weighing the desirability of declaring allegiance to this or that crown or making choices of migration from one territory to another in the face of changing local conditions. Allowing space for native comparisons, while still avoiding the trap of reifying the categorical units being critiqued, is a serious balancing act.

This book, then, is not a work of comparative history per se. In order to compare different empires, these units have to be discretely defined, but one of the core arguments made in the pages that follow is that the different colonies present in the Caribbean in this period were not discrete entities at all. Rather, their very entanglement was one of the defining characteristics of the region and of the practices that composed it. At the same time, some comparison is inevitable in an analysis such as this, not least because of the constant comparative observations made by the historical actors living in the region.⁷ Often these observations led to practical action, such as relocating from one island to another in search of better opportunities or claiming subjecthood under a different empire or republic in times of turmoil. Ignoring such contemporary comparisons would lead to misrepresentations of historical constraints and possibilities.

Geographically innovative regional approaches to history have become increasingly important over the last few decades. As national histories have at long last lost some of their hold on the discipline, other frameworks have come to the fore amid widespread debate over how to think of history in a way that does not privilege the national and political boundaries of the present day. This debate is useful insofar as it forces historians to reflect on the important role played by the spatial framing of their work and to consider the importance of actors and structures that might have been left entirely out of view in more traditional perspectives. New definitions, however, can also become unnecessarily restrictive, in essence replacing one set of unhelpful and arbitrary boundaries with another or, in other cases, merely renaming without doing much analytical reframing. This has been especially true in the case of Atlantic history – one of the more widely debated, disputed, and ultimately embraced new fields to emerge in the discipline over the past two decades.⁸ While an Atlantic perspective can serve to increase awareness

⁷ For an illuminating discussion of comparisons made by historical actors, see Renaud Morieux, “Indigenous Comparisons,” in *History after Hobsbawm: Writing the Past for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. John Arnold, Matthew Hilton, and Jan Rieger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 50–75.

⁸ For a modest sample of the historiographical debate, see Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Peter A. Coclanis, “Atlantic World or Atlantic/World?,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 63:4

and understanding of transnational, inter-imperial, and cross-cultural exchanges and links within this particular geographical space, it can also blind us to those connections that go beyond the Atlantic basin and to those parallels that we might find elsewhere on the globe. These blind spots are not an inherent limitation of the field, but rather a potential danger – one exacerbated by the recent tendency toward narrowness.

The book is Atlantic in scope insofar as it deals with a geographical area that is located within the Atlantic basin, and is embedded in multiple different trans-Atlantic networks.⁹ The scope is also global, however, as the same networks inevitably span wider than a single body of water, and the processes of global imperialism and commercial activity across continents influence the developments in the Caribbean to a significant extent, particularly in the nineteenth century. To a certain degree, the analysis can thus be characterized as Atlantic in scope but global in approach. Rather than operate under such programmatic disciplinary labels, however, the book takes specific theoretical insights from Atlantic history and other approaches, using these to sharpen the focus and shape the conceptual framing of the historical analysis. Three related trends have been particularly influential for the present book. First is the new focus on spatiality and maritime or liminal geography in Atlantic history, as exemplified by the work of Linda Rupert, Michael J. Jarvis, Paul Pressly, Karwan Fatah-Black, and Ernesto Bassi.¹⁰ Second is the particular focus on social networks, championed in many accounts including those by Kerry Ward, Alison Games, David Hancock,

(2006): 725–42; Alison Games, “Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, Opportunities,” *The American Historical Review* 111:3 (2006): 741–57; Jack P. Greene and Philip D. Morgan, eds., *Atlantic History: A Critical Appraisal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); David Armitage, “Three Concepts of Atlantic History,” in *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800* (2nd edition), ed. Armitage and Michael J. Braddick (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1–12; Lauren Benton, “The British Atlantic in Global Context,” in *ibid.*, 271–89; Armitage, “The Atlantic Ocean,” in *Oceanic Histories*, ed. Armitage, Alison Bashford, and Sujit Sivasundaram (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 98–102.

⁹ According to David Armitage’s most recent typology of Atlantic historiography, the present study would likely qualify more specifically as an “infra-Atlantic history.” See Armitage, “The Atlantic Ocean.”

¹⁰ Linda Rupert, *Creolization and Contraband: Curaçao in the Early Modern Atlantic World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012); Michael J. Jarvis, *In the Eye of All Trade: Bermuda, Bermudians, and Maritime Atlantic World 1680–1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Paul M. Pressly, *On the Rim of the Atlantic: Colonial Georgia and the British Atlantic World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013); Karwan Fatah-Black, “A Swiss Village in the Dutch Tropics: The Limitations of Empire-Centred Approaches to the Early Modern Atlantic World,” *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 128:1 (2013): 31–52; Ernesto Bassi, *An Aqueous Territory: Sailor Geographies and New Grenada’s Transimperial Greater Caribbean World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

8 Introduction

Christian J. Koot, and Fabricio Prado.¹¹ Third and last is the view of empire as being composed of various sets of practices. This type of practice analysis has been particularly pronounced in historical scholarship on colonial law, in studies of slave societies, and in the study of imperial knowledge production.¹²

The Islands at a Glance

The Leeward Islands were given their name by European explorers due to their downwind location relative to ships arriving in the Caribbean from the eastern coasts of the Atlantic basin, making it easy for these ships to reach Leeward ports by simply sailing with the wind. They are made up of the northern half of the Lesser Antilles, spanning from the Virgin Islands in the northwest to Dominica in the southeast (see Figure 1.1). Found among them are some of the smallest populated islands in the Caribbean Sea. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the colonies of the Leeward Islands belonged to a multitude of European empires, including those of Britain, Denmark, France, the Netherlands,

¹¹ Kerry Ward, *Networks of Empire: Forced Migration in the Dutch East India Company* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Alison Games, *Webs of Empire: English Cosmopolitans in an Age of Expansion, 1560–1660* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); David Hancock, *Oceans of Wine: Madeira and the Emergence of American Trade and Taste* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Christian J. Koot, *Empire at the Periphery: British Colonists, Anglo-Dutch Trade, and the Development of the British Atlantic, 1621–1713* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Fabricio Prado, *Edge of Empire: Atlantic Networks and Revolution in Bourbon Rio de la Plata* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015). See also David Prior, “After the Revolution: An Alternative Future for Atlantic History,” *History Compass* 12:3 (2014): 300–309.

¹² For uses of practice in legal history, see Lauren Benton, *Law and Colonial Cultures: Legal Regimes in World History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Mary Sarah Bilder, *The Transatlantic Constitution: Colonial Legal Culture and the Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Daniel J. Hulsebosch, *Constituting Empire: New York and the Transformation of Constitutionalism in the Atlantic World, 1664–1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Ken MacMillan, *Sovereignty and Possession in the English New World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); MacMillan, *The Atlantic Imperial Constitution: Center and Periphery in the English Atlantic World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). For practice analyses in histories of slavery, see, for example, Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Kristen Block, *Ordinary Lives in the Early Caribbean: Religion, Colonial Competition, and Politics of Profit* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012); Vincent Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008). For the practice perspective in histories of imperial knowledge production, see, in particular, Richard Drayton, *Nature’s Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the “Improvement” of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

The Islands at a Glance

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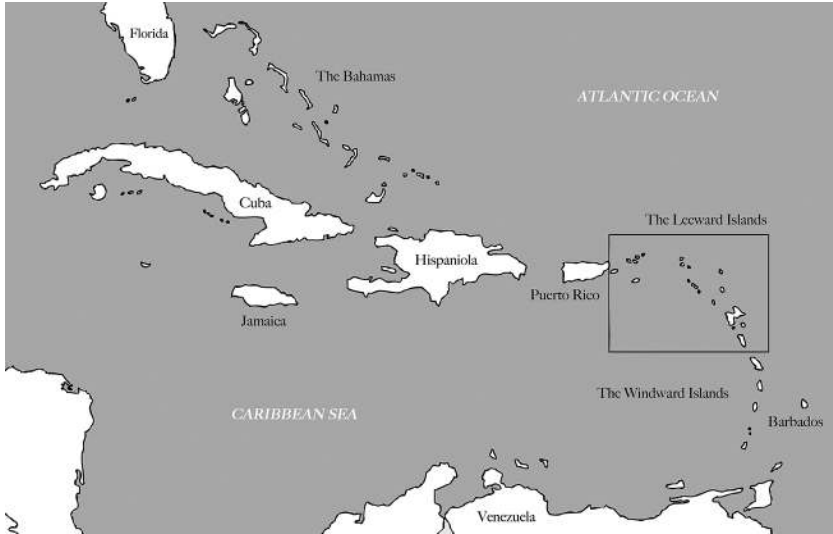


Figure 1.1 The Leeward Islands in the greater Caribbean.

Spain, and Sweden (see Figure 1.2). Besides European settlers and their descendants, the populations included a great number of Africans and Afro-Caribbeans, a variety of creole peoples, and, on the larger islands, remnants of the indigenous Taíno and Carib peoples. Leeward Islanders were highly polyglot and diverse, most of them speaking several languages and able to communicate across colonial and imperial boundaries. The main languages of the region were Dutch, English, French, and Spanish, alongside a number of local creoles.¹³

The Virgin Islands are a distinct group of islands within the Leewards, consisting at the turn of the century of island colonies belonging to the Spanish, Danish, and British empires.¹⁴ The colonial government in

¹³ Indeed, at the turn of the century the most common language spoken across the Leeward Islands, including in Danish, Dutch, and Swedish colonies, was Creole English.

¹⁴ The Virgin Islands are a distinct island chain in a geographical sense as they are separated from Puerto Rico to the west by the Virgin Passage and from the rest of the Lesser Antilles to the east by the Anegada Passage. The Anegada Passage is typically seen as the dividing line between the Greater and the Lesser Antilles, but the period of colonization saw significant maritime traffic connecting the Virgin Islands to their neighboring colonies in both directions. In this sense they came to form a bridge of sorts between the Greater and Lesser Antilles, and in the period studied here they were seen by both Danish and British empires as a key component of the Leeward Islands, both geographically and administratively. The Virgin Islands' proximity to each other is even greater than that of the other islands in the Lesser Antilles, although island density is not at the same level as within the Bahamas to the northwest.

10 Introduction

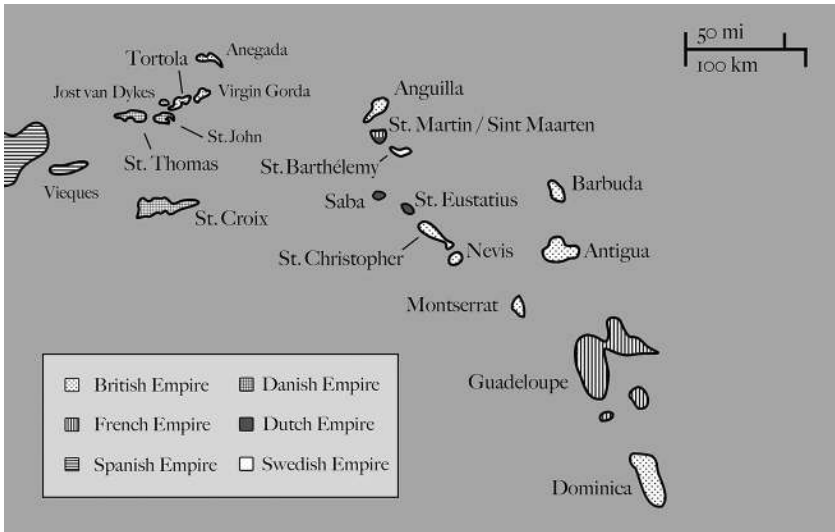


Figure 1.2 Empires in the Leeward Islands, 1815.

Puerto Rico administered the Spanish Virgin Islands of Vieques and Culebra, while the British and Danish islands made up their own colonial units. The British Virgin Islands consist of four main islands – Tortola, Anegada, Virgin Gorda, and Jost Van Dyke – alongside a number of smaller islands and keys, most of which were uninhabited. The Danish West Indies, today the US Virgin Islands, likewise consist of three larger islands – St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix – as well as a great number of lesser surrounding islands. The Danish or US islands are volcanic, geographically a continuation of the central mountain range of Puerto Rico, whereas the British are low limestone islands.¹⁵ Most of the Danish and British Virgin Islands are exceedingly small, ranging in size from Jost Van Dyke’s 3.1 square miles to St. Thomas’s 32 square miles, with the exception of St. Croix, which not only is located further away from any of the other islands but also is by far the biggest, measuring a total of 82 square miles (see Figures 1.3 and 1.4 for their relative location).¹⁶

¹⁵ William F. Keegan and Corinne L. Hofman, *The Caribbean before Columbus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 5–6.

¹⁶ The islands in order of size are as follows: Jost Van Dyke (3.1 square miles), Virgin Gorda (8.1 square miles), Anegada (14.7 square miles), St. John (19.7 square miles), Tortola (21.6 square miles), St. Thomas (32 square miles), and St. Croix (82 square miles).