



Primates in the Caribbean: Monkeys' *Histoire* in a 16th-century French manuscript

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Abstract: This work examines the historical context and implications of the accounts on nonhuman primates reported in the *Histoire Naturelle des Indes*, circa 1586. It is a fundamental document for the understanding of Caribbean natural history. It shows color illustrations and descriptions of different animals, including primates such as *Sapajus flavius* (or *S. apella* cf. *margaritae*.), *Callithrix* sp., and *Alouatta palliata*. This document offers early reports of monkeys in the circum-Caribbean region.

Keywords: *Alouatta*, *Callithrix*, *Sapajus*, history of primatology, Brazil, Panama, Venezuela

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Introduction

The *Histoire Naturelle des Indes* (hereafter referred as the *Histoire* (Anonymous 1996a)), also known as the *Drake Manuscript* (Anonymous 1996b), is an unusual manuscript dated circa 1586. It compiles numerous early colour illustrations with brief hand-written descriptions of ethnological, botanical, and zoological matters of the circum-Caribbean region. This is certainly one of the most important visual documents for understanding the early history of Caribbean natural history. This French manuscript (MA 3900) has 199 watercolor illustrations with brown ink and pen in folios of 29.3 × 19.7 cm (134 leaves) numbered with pencil within an 18th-century leather binding of 30 × 21 cm (Klikenborg 1996). The designs may have been drawn by more than one illustrator (Brochard & Chambon 1991, Klikenborg 1996). Despite that this manuscript was owned by the French Father Jean-Paul Bignon (1662–1743), it was hidden from scholars for 400 years, until it was donated and deposited in 1983 at the Morgan Library & Museum of New York by the benefactor Clara S. Peck (Klikenborg 1996, Pierce 1996).

The manuscript

The origin of this French-written manuscript is still uncertain, and its author is unknown (Klikenborg 1996, Pierce 1996). However, it has been referred to in relation with the English privateer Sir Francis Drake (1540–1596) (Fig. 1A). F. Drake navigated the Caribbean Sea with his cousin, the English naval pilot Sir John Hawkins (1532–1595; O'Brian 1996, Cummins 1997). They organized slave trade travels to the Caribbean (Kesley 2003) in different years; the first voyage between 1562 and 1563, the second one between 1564 and 1565, and their third voyage between 1567 and 1569. For the last one, Hawkins' diary detailed that they embarked to the eastern African coast and then to the Caribbean Sea between February of 1568 and January of 1569 (Kraus 1970, Georget & Rivero 1994). It is also known that in 1573, F. Drake visited Panama, and between September of 1595 and April of 1596, attacked



Fig. 1. Sir Francis Drake in 1590 by Marcus Gheeraerts, the Younger.

the Canary Islands, Panama, and Puerto Rico. They struggled within Spanish territories in the Caribbean with their constant naval incursions. Both English traders ended up visiting the coasts of Dominica, Venezuelan islands and continental territory, Aruba, Curaçao, Colombia, Panama, Santo Domingo, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Florida. During those landings, both English traders and their crew might have collected natural history objects, as well as recorded “customs” of Amerindians, Africans, and Europeans. Once they returned to England, they were received as heroes by the members of the court of Queen Elizabeth I (Thomson 1988).

Considering the previous information, it seems that the content of the manuscript follows the “British route” of F. Drake’s voyages, and independently, that the factual information might have a French origin. In this direction, Klikenborg (1996) provides a relevant clue to answer this idea. During Drake’s expeditions, he used to travel with French sailors, probably Protestants. Consequently, the author was possibly a Huguenot (Klikenborg 1996), a Calvinist French Protestant (Lestringant 1994). Lestringant (1994) also suggested the similarity of this work with parts of the second edition of Jean de Léry (1580) treaty, a Swiss Calvinist priest that went to Brazil in the 16th century (see Léry’s primatological facet in Urbani 2011). Alternatively, a possible author of this manuscript was the French traveler Samuel de Champlain of Brouages (1567–1635; Fig. 2A; see: Maeer 2007), or a potential anonymous co-

pyist under his supervision. This French explorer was born in the historical French province of Saintonge, and was baptized as a Protestant, like his parents (Thierry 2012). According to his *Brief discours*, S. de Champlain (1601, see also: Laverdière 1870) supposedly first visited the New World while travelling to the Caribbean territories of Cayman Islands, Bermudas, Margarita Island (Venezuela), Santo Domingo, Guadalupe, Colombia, Cuba, Panama -including the town of Portobelo-, Puerto Rico, and Mexico between 1599 and 1601. The dates and places indicated by Champlain (1601) mostly coincide with those reported in the itinerary of F. Drake's voyages in the Caribbean. Nevertheless, as alleged by Vannini de Gerulewicz (1989), it is likely that S. de Champlain never traveled to this region, and therefore wrote his manuscript by using reports about the Caribbean from other travelers. Later, S. de Champlain actually completed multiple trips to North America, where he established the first French town in Canada (Deschamps 1951). When the visual aesthetics of Champlain's *Brief discours* illustrations of some vertebrates such as, for example, birds and rabbits of his *Planche XXIV*



Fig. 2. (A) Samuel de Champlain (1613); (B) Alleged self-portrait of the anonymous author of the manuscript (Anonymous 1996a, b: fol. 111).

are compared with those animals from the *Histoire*, or Champlain's snake of *Planche XLVI* with one fish of *Histoire's* folio 96v (see Maeer 2007), the similarities are remarkable. In both manuscripts, the general hand-writing is similar. For instance, the lettering type in image labels is almost identical (e.g., the calligraphy of island of "La Margverite" in Champlain's *Planche XI* and *Histoire's* folio 56;) as there are parts of the texts that are similar (e.g., the stories of pearl fishing in Margarita island in both documents: Maeer 2007). Detailed paleographic and iconographic studies are needed to fully test these contentions. Furthermore, it is relevant to

point out Lestringant's (1994) assertion, when he indicated that an alleged self-portrait of the *Histoire*'s author appears in folio 111 of this manuscript (Fig. 2B). When Fig. 2A and Fig. 2B are compared, sameness is once again apparent. The eyes, foreheads and noses of both men as well as the positions of their left arms, calves, and feet are strikingly similar. After observing this phenotypic comparison, it can be stated that S. de Champlain (Fig. 2A) and the alleged self-portrayed anonymous author (Fig. 2B) are likely the same person with different clothes.

The *Histoire* has 63 botanical sketches, 92 faunal illustrations, and 44 ethnological representations (Janick 2012). Ethnologically, *Histoire*'s depictions of indigenous peoples in daily life activities certainly are noteworthy and quite unique for that time (e.g., Ayala-Lafée *et al.* 2017; for another circum-Caribbean early source, see also: Bry 1592). From a botanical point of view, Janick (2012) found that many plants represented in this manuscript have horticultural uses. The zoological component of this manuscript is particularly large and thoughtful. There are various references of invertebrates and vertebrates of the Caribbean. For instance, Goffort and Janick (2015) identified aquatic invertebrates from this historical document, suggesting that some of them were drawings that resulted from direct observation. No other study seems to specifically address a full set of faunal depictions of this manuscript. For example, mosquito flying behaviour is presented as it actually is, as a mosquito "cloud" (Neri 2011). In addition, the color drawings of regional birds deserve further study, not only from a natural history perspective but also from an ethno-ornithological viewpoint. Mammals are also depicted, showing several terrestrial specimens. It also showed what might be the first illustration of the currently extinct Caribbean monk seal (*Neomonachus tropicalis*) named a *chaille*. In this article, I examine the representation of primates of the *Histoire*, either from the Caribbean or other regions of the Americas, and their contextual significance for the early history of European natural history in the Neotropics. The Linnaean names used to identify each primate species indicated in this study follow the latest taxonomic classification, as provided by the International Union for the Conservation Nature (IUCN) (IUCN Red List webpage; *sensu* Mittermeier *et al.* 2013). However, it must be pointed out that determination of mammal species in general, and primates in particular, depicted in early sources is often a challenge (e.g., Groves 2008).

Primates in the Caribbean

The first report of a primate in the *Histoire* is that of a monkey labeled with the French name: *Cifre* (Fig. 3A). In folio 61 (Anonymous 1996a, b: 261), it mentions: "This is a very agile beast. The Indians cannot tame it or feed it for they die of grief and do not eat in captivity. They have a face like a human and are very mischievous and rebellious and throw themselves against people mainly at their faces and eyes." The description of captive grieving and active behaviour seems to resemble capuchins rather than the other most conspicuous primates of the region, howler monkeys. In addition, the facial, capped head hair form, and pelage characteristics as observed in the illustration seem to be similar to tufted capuchins.

The general yellowish colour of the *cifre*, and its rounded hairy forehead more closely resemble a Brazilian blonde capuchin monkey (*Sapajus flavius*). During the slave trade trips by Drake and Hawkins to Portuguese eastern Africa, this primate may have been transacted with the Portuguese or French, considering that monkeys were exchanged and commonly reported in commercial ships sent from Brazil (Urbani 1999, 2016). *Histoire*'s author refers to Portuguese territories (Guinea and Brazil) in the manuscript (Anonymous 1996a, b: fol. 111). If it is assumed that this capuchin and the marmoset, the next described primate in the *Histoire*, were actually trafficked between Brazil and the Caribbean, then this seems to be the first report of Brazilian primates in this region. Even though the previous hypothesis is the most plausible, alternatively, considering a slight brownish colour in the dorsal part of that monkey, as a second option, the depicted primate might be a Margarita's Island capuchin. On

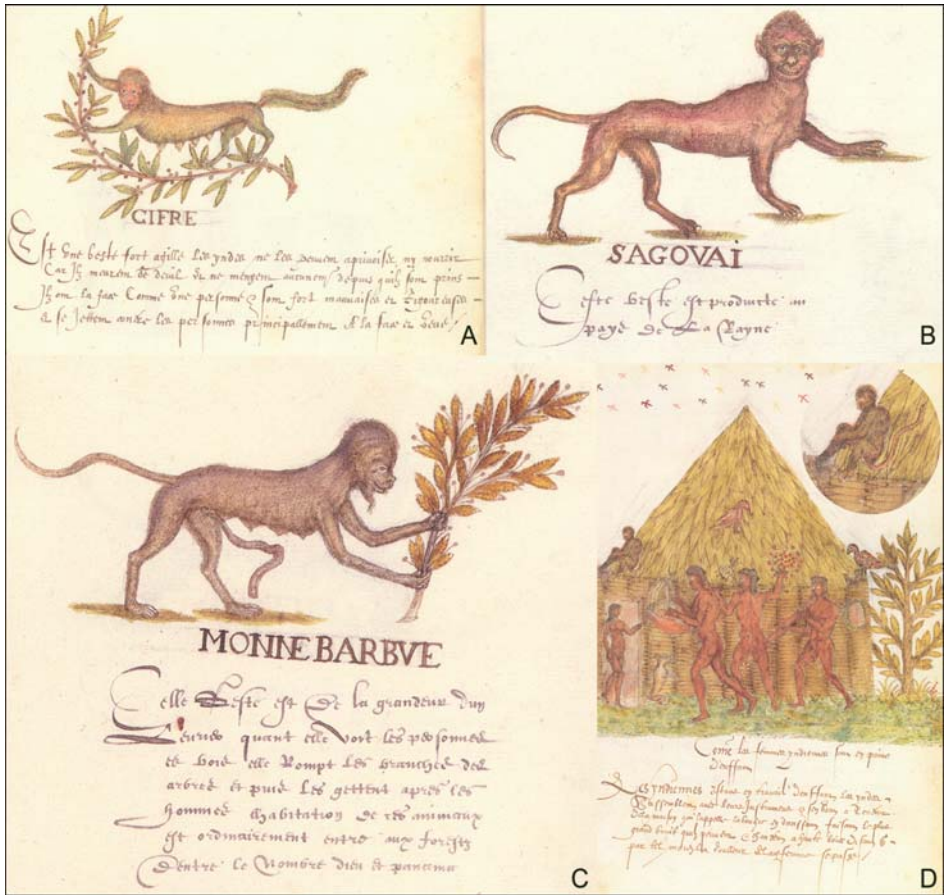


Fig. 3. (A) The Cifre, possibly a blond capuchin (*Sapajus flavius*) or a tufted capuchin monkey (*S. apella* or *S. apella margaritae*) (Anonymous 1996a, b: fol. 61); (B) The Sagovai, a marmoset (*Callithrix* sp.) (Anonymous 1996a, b: fol. 65); (C) The Monne Barbve (bearded monkey), mantled howler monkey (*Alouatta palliata*) (Anonymous 1996a, b: fol. 69); (D) Panamanian monkey in an indigenous house (Anonymous 1996a, b: fol. 107).

March 20th, 1568, Francis Drake visited Margarita Island, and later during his third voyage. S. de Champain wrote that he also was on this island. This is the only place visited by both navigators, in the Caribbean insular territory, with a native population of tufted capuchins. Moreover, Amerindian's activities are described for this island (*La Margverite*) only four folios before the description of this monkey in the *Histoire*. Thus, if the second alternative is assumed, this might also be the first illustration and factual report of the endemic Margarita Island capuchin monkey, *Sapajus apella margaritae*, as well as the first indication of the presence of tufted capuchins on this island since the 16th century or even earlier. Another possibility is that this monkey might be a Guianan capuchin (*Sapajus apella*), with a similar phenotype to *S. apella margaritae*. In this sense, during that century there was intensive slave traffic of indigenous peoples from the Guianas to Cubagua and the island of Margarita (e.g., Bentivenga de Napolitano 1977), which might also imply the transportation of animals such as primates. Three untufted capuchin monkeys also live in the southern Circum-Caribbean region: the Trinidad Island capuchin (*Cebus albifrons trinitatis*), the endemic Venezuelan

brown capuchin (*C. brunneus*), and the wedge-capped capuchin (*C. olivaceus*), both of the latter from the Venezuela coastal *terra firme*, having relatively similar coloration, but not tufted, so they are not likely to be the *cifre*. Although later, in 1595, the English pirate captain Robert Dudley reported the existence of monkeys, including capuchins, in the island of Trinidad (Urbani 2004). Certainly, the two white-faced capuchin species (*C. imitator* and *C. capucinus*) from the Caribbean Panama are not the illustrated individual.

The second monkey represented in this historical account is the *Sagovai* (Fig. 3B). In its description can be read: "This animal is found in the country called La Rayne" (Anonymous 1996a, b: fol. 65, 262). Klikenborg (1996) located "La Rayne" in Colombia, without additional comments. A sixteenth-century locality with a similar toponymy, either in French or Spanish, along with the Caribbean coast and islands of this country, was not found in any cartographic source. However, if it is assumed that this is the case, then it is possible to add the Colombian localities of Santa Fe and Río de la Hacha as the ones where J. Hawkins, F. Drake and his crew stopped over during his second voyage, the last one visited between the 19th and 21st of May, 1565 (Georget & Rivero 1994). S. de Champlain indicated Cartagena as the Colombian port he visited. If it is assumed that this is an actual Colombian callitrichid; then, considering the places visited by these travelers, the only primate species that might be assigned to this illustration is a cotton-top tamarin (*Saguinus oedipus*). However, this is very unlikely, as the phenotype differs significantly from *S. oedipus* (see below for an accurate identification). In addition, the toponymy of "La Rayne" cannot denote a site of the former French West Indies (Martinique, Saint Martin, Haiti, Guadalupe, Saint-Barthélemy, Saint Lucia, and Dominica) or Louisiana or French Guyana, because these territories were occupied by the French during the 17th century; decades after Drake's and Champlain's voyages, as well as the alleged writing date of this manuscript. Despite the previous geographical facts, the reported name *sagovai* has a similar Tupi name origin and pronunciation as is used in today's Brazilian Portuguese (*sauim*), as well as a physical characteristic that resembles a primate species not found in Colombia or the Caribbean: a marmoset (*Callithrix* sp.) with such brownish coloration and conspicuous claw-like nails. Thus, it was trafficked to the Caribbean from Brazil as indicated above or, as found for aquatic invertebrates (Goffort & Janick 2015), this primate was not drawn *in situ*; possibly then, in Europe. In this direction, it is a fact that during the first half of the 16th century, European nobles such as members of the Tudor dynasty were known for having marmosets as pets (Urbani 2007).

In the *Histoire*, another monkey is represented alone. In folio 69 (Fig. 3C), it may be read: "*Monne Barbve* [*bearded monkey*]. This animal is the size of a greyhound. When it sees people in the woods it breaks off branches and throws them at the men. Their habitat is normally in the forests between Nombre de Dios and Panama" (Anonymous 1996a, b: fol. 69, 262). The physical description such as the barb and size and form, as well as the reported behaviour, which is also commonly found in other early chronicles (Urbani 1999, 2016) points to the identification of a howler monkey. The Panamanian location serves to identify it as *Alouatta palliata*. Also in Panama, a primate (either *Alouatta palliata*, *Ateles geoffroyi*, *Ateles fusciceps*), with no particular phenotypic characteristic for a final taxonomic determination, is represented at the top of an indigenous house (Anonymous 1996a, b: fol. 107, 269) (Fig. 3D) that is referred to in the section "Come Les Femmes Yndiennes Sont En Paine D'enfant (How the Indian Women Suffer Labor Pains). When Indian women are in labor, the Indian men gather with their musical instruments and walk around the house called *la bouhie* [the bohio], dancing, making as much noise as possible and singing in a loud voice, saying that this means the woman's pain will go away." As found in the previous folio 106, this site is located along the Chagres River. In addition, in this previous description, the shipment of gold and silver is reported from Peru to Panama (crossing from Puerto La Cruz to Nombre de Dios). At Nombre de Dios, F. Drake attacked the so-called Spanish Silver Train on March–April, 1573. The illustration and description of these monkeys might have occurred around this date. By placing this event in 1573, the preparation of this manuscript may have occurred at least

between this year and 1586. S. de Champain suggested that he visited Panama, and in his account, described the attack of F. Drake in Portobelo. This kind of illustration of Neotropical primates with indigenous peoples is also presented in other French sources of the 16th century (e.g., Thevet 1558, Léry 1580).

Final remarks

Some final comments are drawn from the primatological accounts of the *Histoire*. The *cifre* seems to be the first illustration and description of a Brazilian primate trafficked into the Caribbean (but see an alternative identification). If the *Sagovai* was transported to the Caribbean, then it might also be the first specimen of *Callithrix* sp. to be confirmed in this region. Thus, it represents an example of early European trade of wild fauna between American territories. The last primates depicted and described in this document represent the earliest illustrations of Panamanian monkeys. The images of the capuchin monkey and the howler monkey seem to have been done directly in the field, as some marine invertebrates were found in this manuscript (see: Goffort & Janick 2015), as the callithrichine might have been either drawn in the Americas or in Europe, where this monkey was quite popular. In sum, the primates of the *Histoire* amplify the early modern views of Neotropical primates, and show how they were perceived, circulated, socially constructed, and represented by the Europeans during the Contact period.

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