
Arobe, Francisco de

(c. 1560-?),

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leader of the Afro-Indian Maroon communities of Esmeraldas in early colonial Quito, was born around 1560 in the province of Esmeraldas, Ecuador. According to early reports, Arobe was the son of an African slave named Andrés Mangache and a native woman from Nicaragua, who escaped together from a ship that had anchored on the Esmeraldas coast to take on water and provisions. Arobe and his brother Juan Mangache were two of the “mulatto” leaders of Maroon communities begun by his father that dated back to the late 1550s and 1560s. By 1577, Francisco’s father had been killed in confrontations with other semi-sedentary native communities of the Esmeraldas region. In that year, the Maroon leader Alonso de Illescas attempted to place Francisco and Juan under his leadership, but even with Spanish assistance he failed to do so.

By the 1580s, however, the brothers were dealing directly with Spanish colonizers. In 1583 they assisted Diego López de Zúñiga in his attempt to find gold and emeralds in the region. In 1586 Juan repeatedly traveled to Quito, where he received gifts from Rodrigo de Ribadeneyra in exchange for the Maroon’s assistance in establishing a colony of Spanish settlers in Esmeraldas. However, after rebuffing Ribadeneyra, Juan was arrested, though he was later released. In 1589 Arobe met with, and placed his community under the religious instruction of Fray Juan de Salas of the Mercedarian order. Arobe is credited with establishing a church and founding the village of San Mateo, which he and his people further populated after 1598. The records show little additional activity until the late 1590s, when the Crown Court judge Juan Barrio de Sepulveda traveled to Esmeraldas in order to pacify the Maroons. By then Arobe had gained a reputation for assisting lost travelers who came from ships wrecked on the Esmeraldas coast. Barrio’s meetings with the Maroons resulted in Francisco traveling to Quito in 1599 with two of his sons, Pedro and Domingo, to pledge his loyalty to the Crown.

In addition, the royal court commissioned a now famous portrait by the native artist Andrés Sanchez Galque. In the painting the honorific “don,” a title of minor nobility, precedes the names of Arobe and his sons. Their elevation was apparently based on their deeds, as Judge Barrio described them as rulers over Esmeraldas and “lords of the land.” Arobe also received the military title of “capitán.” The portrait was sent as a gift to King Philip IV, and it remained in the royal collection until the late nineteenth century. While Arobe disappears from the historical record after 1599, his progeny would continue to rule over the Maroon communities for generations. In addition, his likeness has become one of the most recognized portraits of the early colonial period, and it is considered the first signed painting of the Americas.

[*See also* Illescas, Alonso de.]

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See also

Illescas, Alonso de <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-74188>>