

Naval financing and supplies in Cartagena de Indias during the eighteenth century

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Abstract

This article analyses the role of the naval system of Cartagena de Indias during the eighteenth century, especially the elements related to its financing and supply needs. Cartagena was the most important naval base in the southern Caribbean, and this made it necessary to deploy a coastguard system that was capable of curbing smuggling and, at the same time, reinforcing coastal surveillance.

Keywords

Caribbean, Cartagena de Indias, eighteenth century, naval financing, naval system

Introduction

The defence of the coasts of Tierra Firme, with its fundamental nucleus in Cartagena de Indias, was, from the seventeenth century, an element of vital importance for the American authorities. This article analyses the difficulties of financing the naval system of this military settlement, as well as its evolution during the eighteenth century. The extraordinary historiographic progress of the last two decades in studies that relate to the naval policy of Spanish America during the eighteenth century – and also of its rival empires – and its economic and fiscal components has allowed us to draw a very accurate picture of the cost–benefit ratio of the main naval enclaves,

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navies and the great imperial strategy.¹ However, and as strange as it may seem, the main port of New Granada, Cartagena de Indias, still awaits a monograph devoted to its naval system, financial aspects and how it fits within the context of the Spanish Caribbean or even the imperial nexus. This work, which is far from definitive, aims to analyse the various naval aspects of this port (supplies, financing) in a context in which Spain's naval policy in America was clearly expansive, although mainly focused on Havana, despite the fact that Cartagena was the most important military enclave in the southern Caribbean and a historical target of the enemies of the Spanish Empire in America.

The port and its fortified system made Cartagena a potential deterrent against Spain's enemies,² but at the same time it was a magnet that attracted these enemies, due to its unique strategic position and mercantile wealth.³ Even during the second half of the seventeenth century, in a context of economic contraction and decline, 16 fleets of galleons arrived in Cartagena, as well as a total of 810 ships of various sizes, each of which had to pay its corresponding entry tax (*almojarifazgo*). With an annual average of some 50,000 pesos between 1645 and 1699,⁴ the income generated by the mercantile circuit, derived from the arrival of galleons and merchant ships, transformed Cartagena into one of the main 'keys' of the Caribbean,⁵ the loss of which would have been catastrophic. However, despite the expenditure on its naval protection system – almost 800,000 pesos in the last 55 years of the seventeenth century⁶ – the situation at the beginning of the eighteenth century was not very reassuring, with an endemic shortage of good ships, provisions and personnel destined for seafaring work.

1. Jacques A. Barbier, 'Indies Revenues and Naval Spending: The Cost of Colonialism for the Spanish Bourbons, 1763–1805', *Jahrbuch für Geschichte von Staat, Wirtschaft, und Gesellschaft Lateinamerikas*, 21 (1984), 171–88; María Baudot Monroy, 'Política naval y movilización de recursos para la defensa colonial al inicio de la Guerra de la Oreja de Jenkins (1739–1740)', in Polifemo Ediciones, ed., *Expediciones navales españolas en el siglo XVIII* (Madrid, 2014), 37–62; Frank Broeze, *Maritime History at the Crossroads: A Critical Review of Recent Historiography* (Oxford, 2017); Oscar Cruz Barney, 'El régimen jurídico de los guardacostas novohispanos en la segunda mitad del siglo XVIII', *Revista de Historia Naval*, No. 60 (1998), 45–62; Jan Glete, *War and the State in Early Modern Europe: Spain, the Dutch Republic and Sweden as Fiscal-Military States, 1500–1660* (London, 2002); Allan J. Kuethe, 'La crisis naval en tiempo de Carlos IV', *Boletín Real Academia Sevillana de Buenas Letras*, 42 (2014), 269–82; José Antonio Ocampo, 'Apuntes para un estudio de las fuerzas navales sutiles españolas (ss. XVIII–XIX)', *Revista de Historia Naval*, No. 104 (2009), 7–48; David Parrott, *The Business of War: Military Enterprise and Military Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford, 2012).
2. Rodolfo Segovia Salas, *Las fortificaciones de Cartagena de Indias: Historia y estrategia* (Bogotá, 1992).
3. Rafal Reichert, 'La forja del imperio ultramarino: El sistema defensivo y la vida soldadesca en los presidios del Gran Caribe en el siglo XVII: Caso de la guarnición de La Habana', *Secuencia*, No. 108 (2020), 4–7.
4. José Manuel Serrano Álvarez, 'Gasto militar y situados en Cartagena de Indias, 1645–1699', in *Cartagena de Indias en el siglo XVII* (Cartagena de Indias, Seville University, 2007), 285–96.
5. Juan Manuel Zapatero, *La guerra del Caribe en el siglo XVIII* (Madrid, 1990), 116–17.
6. Serrano Álvarez, 'Gasto militar', 307.

To alleviate this situation, specific taxes were created at the end of the seventeenth century and continued during most of the eighteenth century to fund the Cartagena naval complex,⁷ such as a five-per-cent tax on damages, a two-per-cent tax on the entry and exit of goods, and a two-per-cent tax on wine.⁸ Likewise, the treasury of Cartagena had been endowed with a specific fund for the income and expenses of the navy, which was in operation until the middle of the eighteenth century. This is unique because, traditionally, military revenues and expenses were channelled and distributed based on the principle of centralization in a single royal treasury. The fact that Cartagena had a structure for naval expenses separate from the main treasury has only one similar counterpart – the case of Havana, the other major port and shipyard in the Caribbean.⁹

What is perhaps surprising is that the interest in providing Cartagena with a first line of defence on the seaboard came from afar. In 1639, Madrid ordered the purchase of three ships, which were to be paid for by the city and its commercial class from the profits from the trade in enslaved people, but in the end only two could be acquired.¹⁰ The situation did not improve with the creation of the Armada de Barlovento in 1640 – which from the 1670s had one of its bases in Cartagena – because of a lack of financial means.¹¹ The times when the Cartagena galleys served as an effective protective belt against smuggling and privateers at the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth century were gone by the eighteenth century.¹² It should be noted at this point that the Cartagena galleys had been practically dismantled in practice in the 1610s,¹³ although in the following decade unsuccessful attempts were made to resurrect them.¹⁴

As a result, when Baron de Pointis appeared in front of the walls of Cartagena in 1697, he literally strolled in with total impunity and without a naval defence – which was otherwise almost non-existent – putting up the slightest resistance. The capture and sacking of the enclave very possibly represented its lowest point in terms of its defensive capacity.¹⁵

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7. This navy does not refer to specific ships permanently based in Cartagena but to the ships of the Armada de Barlovento that arrived in port from time to time and to small vessels for the fight against smuggling.
 8. Archivo General de Indias (hereafter, AGI), Contaduría, 1407, Main Treasury of Cartagena de Indias.
 9. José Manuel Serrano Álvarez, *El astillero de La Habana en el siglo XVIII: Historia y construcción naval, 1700–1805* (Madrid, 2018), 126–32.
 10. AGI, Contaduría, 1406, RO, 26 May 1639.
 11. Bibiano Torres Ramírez, *La Armada de Barlovento* (Seville, 1981), 72–7.
 12. Sebastián Amaya Palacios, ‘Las galeras de Cartagena de Indias (1578–1624)’, *Revista de Historia Naval*, No. 138 (2017), 35–41.
 13. AGI, Santa Fe, 38, Letter from Governor Diego de Acuña to the King, 12 July 1615.
 14. Sebastián Amaya Palacios, *Las galeras de Tierra Firme (1578–1612): Fiscalidad, comercio, abastecimiento y proyección del poder naval castellano en el Caribe Sur* (La Rábida, 2023), 241–8.
 15. Antonio Espino López, ‘Armas para las Indias: El problema del suministro de armas y la defensa colonial durante el reinado de Carlos II’, *Revista Complutense de Historia de América*, 45 (2019), 189–210; Ricardo Borrero Londoño, ‘De Pointis y la representación textual de la expedición a Cartagena en 1697: Tipología discursiva, ambigüedad y pragmatismo trascendental’, *Fronteras de la Historia*, 14 (2009), 368–90.

This should not come as a surprise since, in the 1670s, Henry Morgan had also taken Portobelo easily, with no opposition from Spanish naval forces.¹⁶

It is striking that the main port in the southern Caribbean lacked its own navy from the 1630s after the disappearance of its galleys and that, of the 50,000 pesos estimated to be earned annually for its naval system,¹⁷ it rarely came close to this figure in the last decades of the seventeenth century. For example, between 1680 and 1698, the average annual income for the ships of Cartagena did not exceed 15,000 pesos,¹⁸ falling short of the bare minimum for the maintenance of its defence system.

Collapse and a slow recovery

Cartagena was still smouldering after Pointis's attack when, in October 1698, a large group of Scots, belonging to the Scottish Company for Trade with Africa and the Indies (founded in 1695), settled in the Darien. Needless to say, the opposition from the Spanish was, once again, non-existent. This 'peaceful' occupation of such an important territory demonstrated how weak the hypothetical Spanish squadrons of the Caribbean were; it is striking how five ships crowded with some 1,200 colonists sailed in front of the western flank of Cartagena without encountering the slightest obstacle. The insertion of enemies of Spain, with the firm intention of staying – they even christened the occupied territory with the name of New Caledonia – posed the risk of unforeseeable consequences for this part of Tierra Firme. The coastal strip occupied by the Scots, facing the Caribbean, was only a few tens of kilometres away from Portobelo, located to the north, while Cartagena de Indias was located to the east, less than a day's sailing away. For more than a century, the galleons arriving in Cartagena had been departing later to celebrate the famous trade fair in Portobelo.¹⁹ This meant that the Scottish settlement was inserted as a wedge right between the Cartagena–Portobelo axis, endangering the entire mercantile circuit of the southern Caribbean coast and consequently putting at serious risk the income that both enclaves received after the arrival of the galleons from Europe.

In this context, the recently appointed governor of Cartagena, Juan Díaz Pimienta,²⁰ could not have had a worse start to his mandate, especially since he was still in Spain when the Scottish occupation took place. However, this governor, a seasoned military career officer and knight of the Military Order of Calatrava,²¹ refused to stand idly by, even with the knowledge that, as he learned shortly thereafter, Spain was planning to send a support squadron to dislodge the Scots. Indeed, on 17 March 1699, the fleet left

16. Kris E. Lane, 'Corsarios, piratas y la defensa de Cartagena de Indias en el siglo XVI', *Boletín Cultural y Bibliográfico*, 44 (2007), 103–10.

17. AGI, Contaduría, 1433, Accounting Report, 16 February 1648.

18. Torres Ramírez, *La Armada de Barlovento*, 258.

19. Enriqueta Vila Vilar, 'Las ferias de Portobelo: Apariencia y realidad del comercio con indias', *Anuario de Estudios Americanos*, 39 (1982), 275–337; Alfredo Castillero, *Estructuras sociales y económicas de Veragua desde sus orígenes históricos: Siglos XVI y XVII* (Panama, 1967).

20. AGI, Santa Fe, 998, Appointment as Governor, 17 June 1698.

21. Lino Duarte Level, *Historia patria* (Caracas, 1911), 209.

Cadiz, comprising five ships and led by Diego de Peredo, Duke of Infantado, with about 500 men and 100 pieces of artillery. On 6 June, after a voyage that included a stop in Puerto Rico to take on water and disembark dozens of sick men, he arrived in Cartagena de Indias with the new governor, Díaz Pimienta, on board.²²

With unusual speed and efficiency, the governor embarked on his new job the day after arriving in the city,²³ and was able to gather forces that, together with those sent by land by Count de Canillas, the president of Panama,²⁴ made the intruders capitulate almost without resistance on 13 April 1700.²⁵ However, the authorities in Spain did not have much confidence in the efficiency of the restless Díaz Pimienta and, without having exact knowledge of what was going on – or perhaps in anticipation of England supporting the Scots from Jamaica²⁶ – a new naval force was organized and sent in the summer of 1700. This expedition, one of the largest constituted for America in decades, consisted of eight warships and two auxiliary ships carrying more than 4,700 men (seamen and infantry) and over 500 pieces of artillery. Commanded by Admiral Pedro Fernández Navarrete, with Admiral Mateo de Laya in charge of the naval forces, the expedition left Cadiz on 19 June 1700.²⁷ To the surprise of both admirals, when they arrived in Cartagena, their services were no longer needed. Consequently, after leaving two of the warships and the auxiliaries in port and disembarking the troops, they turned back and, in March 1701, they were anchoring again in Cadiz.²⁸ Undoubtedly, this was one of the most pointless and costly naval efforts in the premodern naval history of the Caribbean. Indeed, such a show of force had cost a staggering 700,000 pesos, almost half of which had been financed by the Sevillian Consulate.²⁹

It is important to address the problem of the naval financing of Cartagena during the transition from the late seventeenth century to the first decades of the eighteenth century. Cartagena was never a permanent base for naval forces between the disappearance of its galleys and the slow insertion of the coastguard in the 1720s. This represented an enormous handicap for a city that owed everything to the sea and that, due to its mercantile significance, had suffered – and was to suffer – innumerable attacks. Although, in theory, it was one of the bases of the Armada de Barlovento, in practice, this squadron, which was in total disarray around 1700, centred its activities on the Veracruz–Havana axis.

22. Archivo Histórico de la Nobleza, Osuna, CT.121, D.11, Letter from Peredo, 29 August 1699.

23. Julie Orr, *Scotland, Darien and the Atlantic World, 1698–1700* (Edinburgh, 2018), 106.

24. Guillermo Céspedes del Castillo, 'La defensa militar del istmo de Panamá a fines del siglo XVII y comienzos del XVIII', *Anuario de Estudios Hispanoamericanos*, 1 (1952), 246.

25. Pablo Emilio Pérez-Mallaina Bueno, *Política naval española en el Atlántico, 1700–1715* (Seville, 1982), 389.

26. It should be remembered that until the Act of Union (1707), which legally created the Great Britain, Scotland and England, as independent kingdoms, were technically separate, and England was at peace with Spain at this time.

27. AGI, Panama, 109, Letter from Admiral Pedro Fernández Navarrete, 19 June 1700.

28. Pérez-Mallaina Bueno, *Política naval española*, 389.

29. AGI, Contratación, 3232, List of Funds, 1 June 1701.

The warships that usually arrived at the port were either the galleons that accompanied and protected the fleets arriving from Spain or ships that made short stays. Only occasionally did it receive permanent units for protection, and always in the context of warfare. Probably the best-known case is the arrival of Blas de Lezo in 1737 with the ships *San Felipe*, *África*, *Dragón* and *Conquistador*.³⁰ In critical situations, fleets such as that of Fernández Navarrete usually abandoned port after a short stay. Although Cartagena technically had an independent treasury for naval expenses, the intermittent arrival of ships and the non-existence of permanent fleets – apart from some very small groups of sloops – made it practically impossible to maintain a steady stream of income. From the point of view of the authorities, it did not make sense to make substantial funds available when there were no ships to repair, maintain or build. Unlike Guayaquil,³¹ and especially Havana,³² no large warships were ever built in Cartagena, as the city preferred to build and maintain its fortifications.³³

For these reasons, the financing of the ships that sporadically arrived in Cartagena depended more on external sources of income. The Sevillian Consulate, which was the most interested in the protection of trade with Cartagena, undertook to pay more than 200,000 pesos from the 1670s onwards for all defensive fleets in the Caribbean,³⁴ which naturally included those of Cartagena. The city itself was to contribute 32,000 pesos, which, in theory, Santa Fe was to send to the coast for reasons of protection. However, these payments were never fully made and, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the debt amounted to several tens of thousands of pesos.

One way to mitigate the financial challenges faced by the Caribbean defensive fleets was for the Andalusian merchants to advance capital – usually more than 100,000 pesos – which was part of the capital deducted from the taxes to be paid in Cartagena when the commercial fleets arrived.³⁵ This strategy did not work, especially because Cartagena had been ruined after Pointis's assault, and despite the fact that between 1700 and 1702 the town made a notable financial effort – largely with money sent from Santa Fe – and managed to finance naval expenses with more than 200,000 pesos.³⁶

In this poor financial situation and in a context of conflict in the Americas and Spain because of the War of Spanish Succession (1700–1713), it is not surprising that the naval

30. José Manuel Serrano Álvarez, 'El éxito en la escasez: La defensa de Cartagena de Indias en 1741', *Vegueta*, 16 (2016), 373.

31. María Luisa Laviana, 'La maestranza del astillero de Guayaquil en el siglo XVIII', *Temas Americanistas*, 4 (1984), 74–91; Jorge Ortiz, 'La maestranza naval en el Callao y Guayaquil coloniales', *Revista del Archivo General de la Nación*, 34 (2019), 61–76.

32. Serrano Álvarez, *El astillero*.

33. Segovia Salas, 'Las fortificaciones' (Bogotá, 1982); Rodolfo Segovia Salas, *El lago de piedra: La geopolítica de las fortificaciones españolas del Caribe (1586–1786)* (Bogotá, 2006); Juan Manuel Zapatero, *Historia de las fortificaciones de Cartagena de Indias* (Madrid, 1979); Enrique Marco Dorta, *Cartagena de Indias: Puerto y plaza fuerte* (Bogotá, 1988).

34. Pérez-Mallaina Bueno, *Política naval española*, 304.

35. Pérez-Mallaina Bueno, *Política naval española*, 307.

36. AGI, Contaduría, 1377, specifically, 1700, 90,336 pesos; 1701, 68,871 pesos; 1702, 48,243 pesos.

system collapsed. In 1712, the Windward Armada only had one ship,³⁷ and practically nobody could remember the last time one of the ships of this old and inoperative navy had called at Cartagena. At the dawn of the eighteenth century, the former naval power in the Spanish Caribbean had almost disappeared,³⁸ and it was evident that in order to maintain the American colonies, thorough and far-reaching reforms were needed.

Indeed, one of the primary objectives of the administrative and economic reforms of the eighteenth century was inevitably the navy. Naval power was at the epicentre of most of the structural changes that took place throughout the century, essentially because the authorities were aware of the fundamental role that naval power played in sustaining Spain's power, especially in the Caribbean, which was in practice where the imperial power of the state was anchored. The ineffective naval policy undertaken during the seventeenth century – administrative and fiscal decentralization, a multiplicity of navies and the diversification of construction models – had resulted in the practical disappearance of Spain as a maritime power at the beginning of the eighteenth century. By 1694, the Spanish naval forces had barely 10 ships,³⁹ which made it inevitable that the French would occupy Cartagena de Indias in 1697 with remarkable ease and, from 1700, with them as allies, the fleets of Louis XIV would have to be called on to safeguard the oceanic routes.

Until the arrival of the Bourbons, the business of the navy had been in the hands of the Council of the Indies and the Council of War, with numerous clashes between the two councils on how to deal with naval affairs. In addition, the Council of the Treasury held jurisdiction over the financing of the European naval fleets and had a say in the naval fleets in the Americas, despite the fact that the latter, at least in theory, depended exclusively on funds raised in the Americas – a situation that resulted in friction between institutions and jurisdictional rights. The ineffectiveness of this three-party system did not become evident until the second half of the seventeenth century. The challenges presented by England and France had as an immediate consequence the transfer of the European jurisdictional dispute onto the American Caribbean waters, at a time when the Indies was becoming a theatre of war operations. In this scenario, the position of Cartagena de Indias as a guarantor of the naval defence of the entire southern Caribbean coast was vital.

The first measure to achieve an effective administrative and financial modernization of naval affairs with a view to revitalizing Spanish maritime power consisted in stripping the councils of the previous era (which were slow and inoperative) of their jurisdictions and rights and transferring their powers to a new institution: the Secretary of State and Secretarial Office. In the task of institutionally restructuring Spain's armed forces – especially its naval forces – the first goal was to control a steady flow of revenue. That revenue was to become the basis of all naval reforms and would be channelled and controlled for the benefit of the entire naval network centred in the Caribbean.

37. AGI, Indiferente General, 571, Consejo de Indias, 11 July 1712.

38. David Goodman, *El poderío naval español: Historia de la armada española del siglo XVII* (Barcelona, 2001), 362–5.

39. E. Hernández Esteve, 'Administración y contabilidad en los buques de la Real Armada española: Ordenanza de 1735', *Revista Memoria*, 11–12 (2004), 6.

For this reason, the naval reforms of the early eighteenth century had as their primary objective – one might even say their sole objective – the restructuring of the financial and fiscal model that supported the navy, administered directly by the Secretarial Office. These changes were first implemented in Spain but quickly afterwards also in the Americas, as the navy there remained the main goal of the reforms.

The War of Spanish Succession had a decisive effect on the navy, which was simply submissive to the designs of France, an ally of Spain in the conflict. The troops of the different Spanish navies were reduced to a few ships, which were poorly prepared and equipped, and mostly very old. The crews were scarce and resources even more limited. Cartagena de Indias was only able to invest the paltry sum of 30,000 pesos in naval defence between 1705 and 1713.⁴⁰ In view of the war and the virtual abandonment of the Caribbean fleets, the Cantabrian shipyards – traditionally shipbuilding outlets for the Caribbean fleets until the end of the seventeenth century – found themselves almost paralysed due to the lack of orders as a consequence of delayed payments, fires and enemy attacks.⁴¹ The lack of naval resources was so drastic that it became necessary to seize ships and vessels belonging to private merchants for the war.⁴² A proposal to build 20 war frigates in 1706 and other similar plans met with failure due to a lack of funding, even though it was intended that some of these ships would serve in the defensive fleets in Havana and Cartagena.⁴³

At the same time, the support of colonial America politically and economically was essential to the war effort. The economic and fiscal network concentrated in the circum-Caribbean made the maintenance of its main enclaves⁴⁴ – including Cartagena de Indias and Havana, the southern and northern hubs of naval power in these waters, respectively – a matter of survival for the state. For this reason, the main concern when the new institutional system of secretaries was taking shape was to address the financing needs in America.

Between February and November 1714, the system of secretaries was finally established, with four Secretaries of State and one Secretarial Office, a general overseer for financial matters and a universal intendant to assist him.⁴⁵ The four ministries that were then created were the Secretary of War, the Secretary of the Navy and the Indies, the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Justice. In addition to these institutions, there was the general overseer, with the practical function of the Minister of Finance.

40. AGI, Contaduría, 1422.

41. Cruz Apestegui, 'Arquitectura y construcción navales en la España Atlántica, el siglo XVII y la primera mitad del XVIII: Una nueva sistematización', in *International Symposium on Archaeology of Medieval and Modern Ships of Iberian-Atlantic Tradition* (Oxford, 2000), 170.

42. Luis Navarro García, 'La política indiana', in *Historia General de España y América* (Madrid, 1983), vol. XI-1, 7.

43. José Quintero González, *La Carraca: El primer arsenal ilustrado español (1717–1776)* (Madrid, 2004), 27.

44. Serrano Álvarez, *El astillero*, 44.

45. José Antonio Escudero, *Los orígenes del Consejo de Ministros en España*, vol. 1 (Madrid, 1979), 49.

The old Councils -polysynodial system- were relegated to secondary functions, mainly of justice, emptying them of political content. The new structure created a privileged channel of contact between the King and the secretary in charge of a specific secretariat..

The first Secretary of State and Secretary of the Navy and the Indies, Bernardo Tinajero, who was appointed on 3 December 1714,⁴⁶ initiated extensive reforms in naval affairs with the formalization of the Spanish navy – the Armada – in the eighteenth century and the suppression of the multiple navies that had existed until then. He also centralized the administration and provisioning of all warships in one ministry, operating under a single general intendant of the navy. The priority of this reform was to re-establish Spanish independence in terms of shipbuilding and the maintenance and deployment of naval resources, separately from French. The budgetary restrictions imposed by the debt generated by the end of the War of Spanish Succession, however, forced the state to rely on the American colonies to partially implement these goals. Spanish shipyards in Europe and the Americas were used to revitalize naval power, although the burden of naval spending – at least until the mid eighteenth century – rested with the Caribbean.

The strategic need arose to harmonize the financial potential in the Americas with the objective proposed in Madrid in order to achieve maximum resource efficiency for naval defence in the Atlantic. Havana's role as a shipbuilding site continued with the support of a strong local elite, whose commercial interests in the production of sugar and tobacco were able to support, through taxation, the naval stores in Cuba.⁴⁷ In 1713, Madrid decided in favour of a shipyard in Cuba, where all shipbuilding activities were to be concentrated. Although some ships were built in Guayaquil,⁴⁸ the eighteenth century witnessed the building of large ships, through the heavy concentration of naval resources, in Havana. By the middle of the century, close to half of the Spanish navy's ships were built in Cuba.⁴⁹

The concentration of shipbuilding in Havana relegated Cartagena to a naval post, a mere spectator in the new Caribbean naval strategy of the Spanish monarchy. This decision, however, was not taken lightly. Tierra Firme had demonstrated with the Darien expedition that it had very limited resources and a deficient infrastructure. Simultaneously, the repeated failure to establish regular fairs at Portobelo,⁵⁰ mainly because British smuggling stood as an obstacle to Cartagena's participation in such fairs, forced the Spanish authorities to develop a coastguard system, which was less costly and easier to organize. The idea of a coastguard operating between Portobelo and Cartagena dated back to 1717, but lack of financing had made it impossible to develop the system, particularly because Cartagena refused to provide the necessary

46. Dionisio A. Perona Tomás, *Los orígenes del Ministerio de Marina: La Secretaría de Estado y del Despacho de Marina, 1714–1808* (Madrid, 1998), 389.

47. José Manuel Serrano and Allan J. Kuethe, 'La familia O'Farrill y la élite habanera', in *Las élites urbanas en Hispanoamérica* (Seville, Seville University, 2005), 204.

48. Laviana, 'La maestranza', 83.

49. Serrano Álvarez, *El astillero*, 539–40.

50. AGI, Indiferente, 2726, Lieutenant General of the Navy Baltasar Guevara to Viceroy of Peru Diego Morcillo, 14 February 1722.

funding.⁵¹ It was only in 1722 that the coastguard system of Cartagena de Indias was officially created,⁵² although, surprisingly, its first ships had to be sent from Spain.

In January 1725, the *Princesa de los Cielos* and *Potencia*, 70 and 66 guns, respectively, under the command of Miguel de Sada y Antillón, Conde de Clavijo, left Cadiz for the capital of Tierra Firme, arriving in Cartagena de Indias in March of the same year.⁵³ Coastguard systems were not a novelty in the Caribbean, where they had been active since the last third of the sixteenth century, albeit with varying degrees of success,⁵⁴ and their origin dated back to the 1520s and Castile.⁵⁵ However, the fact that, in the beginning, the Cartagena coastguard system was staffed with peninsular ships was directly related to the enormous financial difficulties in Cartagena. In fact, the 71,463 pesos spent by the colony to support the vessels of the Count of Clavijo in the year of their arrival came from a special remission from Santa Fe, since the local treasury was technically bankrupt. During the following five years, Cartagena was only able to contribute less than 4,000 pesos in total for the naval system that protected the Spanish Caribbean.⁵⁶

Notwithstanding, the investment in naval protection was enormously effective for the inhabitants of Cartagena and its surroundings. The ships from Spain, together with two sloops provided by the city, achieved a great success in the spring of 1725 by capturing two heavily armed Dutch frigates off the coast of Portobelo, obtaining a prize of half a million pesos in merchandise. This event was so notorious that it made it to the pages of the *Gaceta de Madrid*, where it was described in extensive detail.⁵⁷ Unfortunately, financing continued to be the main problem in maintaining a permanent squadron in the port. It is ironic that the creation of the coastguard system had not been allocated specific revenue streams, resources or a specific number of ships and men.

This context partially explains why Lieutenant General Blas de Lezo was sent to Cartagena in 1737, at the same time as the *Compañía de Armadores en Corso* was established in the city.⁵⁸ The person in charge of organizing this company was Pedro Fidalgo, the governor of Cartagena, who travelled with Blas de Lezo with precise instructions to convince the city's merchants to invest in his naval protection system. Twenty residents accepted the governor's invitation and contributed 24,000 pesos for the maintenance of two sloops, emphasizing that these ships should also patrol the coasts of Santa Marta,

51. AGI, Panama, 232, El Pardo, 20 July 1717.

52. Henry Kamen, *Philip V: El rey que reinó dos veces* (Madrid, 2000), 223.

53. Enrique García-Torralla Pérez, *Navios de la Real Armada, 1700–1860* (Madrid, 2016), 102–3.

54. Vera Moya Sordo, 'Los corsarios guardacostas del Golfo-Caribe hispanoamericano a lo largo del siglo XVIII', *Revista Universitaria de Historia Militar*, 10 (2021), 134–5.

55. Esteban Mira Caballos, 'La Armada guardacostas de Andalucía y la defensa del Atlántico (1521–1550)', *Revista de Historia Naval*, No. 56 (1997), 7–20.

56. AGI, Contaduría, 1425.

57. *Gaceta de Madrid*, 28 August 1725.

58. Amada Moreno Lorente, 'La fundación de la Compañía de Armadores en Corso de Cartagena de Indias, 1737', *Temas Americanistas*, 2 (1983), 85–90.

located to the north.⁵⁹ This was the first attempt to legally establish a naval protection system with a permanent base in Cartagena.

The implementation of the coastguard system arose in a very complex geopolitical context, which led to open war with Great Britain in 1739. The newly created *Compañía de Armadores* perceived that the main difficulty lay in the lack of naval supplies and the non-existence of a permanent revenue to finance the coastal fleet. The shareholders of the *Compañía* and the governor proposed to the King in the autumn of 1737 that he send a ship annually with victuals and supplies,⁶⁰ alluding to the inability of the town to deliver the material resources necessary to supply the fleet. Moreover, the effectiveness of the ships and their crews would depend on the success of the coastal and *Compañía* fleets in capturing enemy ships as prizes, which meant that the financing of the coastguard was not guaranteed in advance. If the fleets succeeded in capturing prizes, the sale of the cargoes and ships would be divided among the shareholders and would serve to finance the payment of the crews and the maintenance of the ships. Since local streams of taxation were not channelled to pay for naval defence, the investment would only pay back if the coastguard fleets were successful in capturing ships.

As was to be expected, this system was short-lived. Britain's declaration of war in 1739, the insufficient naval resources that accompanied Blas de Lezo to Cartagena, and the arrival of important English squadrons in the region put an end to the coastguard project before its hypothetical effectiveness could be proven. Vernon's resounding defeat off Cartagena in 1741 undoubtedly marked a turning point.⁶¹ That same year, the local treasury contributed only 10,000 pesos for naval defence, which increased to 77,000 during the following two years – doubtless due to the fear of new English attacks – only thanks to the transfer of funds from the cities of Santa Fe and Quito.⁶²

The birth of a naval base

Spain's surprising victory over the British in the Caribbean had by 1748 translated into the depletion and bankruptcy of Cartagena's naval protection system. Cartagena came out of the war stronger, as the only coastal city in *Tierra Firme*. However, its continuous battle against smuggling was to return immediately after the end of the conflict, this time with the added disadvantage associated with the end of protection in favour of Spanish commercial monopolies in the Indies. The Treaty of Madrid (1750) brought to an end the *Asiento de Negros* and *Navío de Permiso*, which after 1713 had been the only legal channels to undermine Spain's mercantile monopoly in the Indies,⁶³ a diplomatic concession that favoured decades of British incursions in the Spanish Caribbean. This new international Caribbean order resulted in decisive changes that affected the role Cartagena played in the naval defence of Spanish interests in the area.

59. AGI, Santa Fe, 384, 1 September 1737.

60. Moreno Lorente, 'La fundación', 5.

61. José Manuel Serrano Álvarez, 'Success in Scarcity: The Defense of Cartagena de Indias in 1741', *Vegueta*, 16 (2016), 359–83.

62. AGI, Santa Fe, 1097.

63. Allan J. Kuethe, 'Reflexiones', *TEMPUS Revista en Historia General*, 4 (2016), 195.

The signing of the Treaty of Madrid coincided with the creation of a naval station in Cartagena.⁶⁴ Unlike Havana, which had always been a shipyard and a naval post, Cartagena transmuted from an observation and surveillance base into a permanent harbour for the coastguard, with warehouses, a dock and a shipyard for ship repairs.⁶⁵ This new wharf and its respective auxiliary buildings were developed in Getsemani, right next to Cartagena. This shift, supported by the Navy Ordinances of 1748, defined spatial specializations, whereby Cartagena became the centre for the support of the coastguard and Havana the shipbuilding site for the construction of large ocean-going ships.

Although the Navy Ordinances of 1748 clearly defined the role of Havana, regulation for the coastguard was only approved in 1754 after legislative action by Julián de Arriaga, who promoted the Ordenanza de Corso para las Indias.⁶⁶ The legal framework for the coastguard did not guarantee sufficient financial means for its maintenance, however. One of the first challenges encountered by the coastguard was the lack of wood and food, which had to be systematically imported from Havana and Spain until the end of the century.⁶⁷ At the same time, the formal abolition of the fleet and galleon system in 1739 resulted in a notable drop in tax revenues, a trend that could only be compensated for by the increase in remittances from abroad.

Cartagena persevered as a port, however. Even after the liberalization of trade measures, initiated in 1765 and formalized in the Reglamento de Libre Comercio in 1778,⁶⁸ the budgetary strains continued, leaving Cartagena increasingly dependent on monetary contributions from Santa Fe and Quito. Although the income from tax revenues between 1761 and 1800 amounted to an incredible 15,318,105 pesos, military expenditure up to 1788 alone rose to 16,764,064 pesos, reaching more than 20 million in 1800.⁶⁹ Of the total military expenditure before 1788, only 2,185,126 pesos were channelled to naval expenditure,⁷⁰ an amount that it was impossible to cover with local Caribbean revenues. These high naval expenses were directly related not only to the growing activity of its coastguard and naval expeditions that required the mobilization of naval means – such as those carried out in the Darien in 1761, 1767–1768 and 1784–1790⁷¹ – but also to the constant bequest to Cartagena of ships (some of great size) by Havana and Spain.

64. Sergio Paolo Solano de las Aguas, 'El apostadero de la marina de Cartagena de Indias, sus trabajadores y la crisis política de la Independencia', *Economía y Región*, 9 (2015), 211.

65. Solano de las Aguas, 'El apostadero', 212.

66. Oscar Cruz Barney, 'El proyecto de Ordenanza de Corso para Indias de 1754', *Arsiuris*, 14 (1995), 373–431.

67. Solano de las Aguas, 'El apostadero', 215.

68. Miguel Alejandro Malagón Pinzón, 'El Consulado de Comercio de Cartagena', *Revista Estudios Socio-Jurídicos*, 3 (2001), 51–74.

69. AGI, Santa Fe, 1097, 1098, 1099, 1100, 1101, 1102, 1103, 1104, 1105, 1106, 1107, 1108, 1109, 1110, 1111, 1112, 1113, Main Treasury of the Royal Treasury.

70. AGI, Santa Fe, 1097, 1098, 1099, 1100, 1101, 1102, 1103, 1207, 1208, 1209, 1210, 1211, 1212, 1227, 1228, 1229, 1230, 1231, Main Treasury of the Royal Treasury.

71. Nelson Eduardo Rodríguez, 'El imperio contraataca: Las expediciones militares de Antonio Caballero y Góngora al Darién (1784–1790)', *Historia Crítica*, 53 (2014), 201–23; Manuel Gámez Casado, 'Buscando al enemigo inglés: Expediciones de guardacostas españoles al golfo del Darién, 1767–1768', *Anuario de Estudios Americanos*, 75 (2018), 211–36.

The steep increase in naval expenditure coincided with the expansion of the Cartagena wharf in 1757.⁷² The first commander of the coastguard in Cartagena, Pedro Ignacio Bermúdez, reported that he had only four ships, of which one was a 30-gun frigate.⁷³ With an annual budget of 150,000 pesos,⁷⁴ which was to be used not only to pay the seamen and for the purchase of wood and supplies but also for the maintenance of the ships, the available budget fell short of covering the costs of the resources needed for the new wharf. When, in 1763, the 77-gun *El Firme* arrived at the port of Cartagena with more than 400 men on board, hungry and in need of food, the town was unable to provide the necessary supplies and complaints ensued. The viceroy of New Granada, Pedro Messia de la Cerda, angrily informed Spain that it was impossible to cater for a ship of that size and manpower, arguing in favour of sending frigates, which were smaller and easier to maintain.⁷⁵ The lack of funds in Cartagena to respond to the naval constraints continued and, by 1774, the commander and marine intendant of Havana, Lorenzo Montalvo, decided that in view of the budgetary difficulties in Cartagena, all ships sent from Cuba to Tierra Firme were to be paid for by the Havana treasury.⁷⁶ By the mid 1760s, a bitter controversy arose in Cartagena about the most appropriate type of ship for coastal surveillance and the enforcement of anti-smuggling legislation. There were those who advocated for the permanence in port of a large vessel, together with other smaller ships. The political authorities, however, argued for a fleet of small and manoeuvrable ships, such as sloops or xebecs, the maintenance of which was feasible in view of the available financial resources.⁷⁷ In their view, the option of a coastguard system of small ships would ultimately make it a financially sustainable enterprise for the local economy. In this context, at the beginning of the 1770s, a wave of naval improvements was implemented by the engineer Antonio Arévalo, with the goal of improving the defensive system of the city.⁷⁸

The exceptional conjuncture of profound improvements in the military system of Cartagena – fortifications, a garrison and a naval base – and the slow but steady increase in revenues, as a result of the effects of free trade after the legislative changes in 1778, generated enough revenue to finance all the military and naval needs of the colony. Santa Fe and Quito, together with tangential contributions from Havana, committed a significant 8,821,219 pesos between 1770 and 1800 to this goal.⁷⁹ Of this total, approximately 15 per cent was channelled towards the financing of the coastguard and naval

72. AGI, Santa Fe, 447, Report, Madrid, 17 June 1758.

73. AGI, Santa Fe, 1094, Report, 8 November 1760.

74. Solano de las Aguas, 'El apostadero', 216.

75. AGI, Santa Fe, 1095, Report, 22 September 1763.

76. Archivo General de Simancas, Marina, 596, Report from Montalvo to Arriaga, 27 April 1774.

77. Ángel Francisco Manzanilla Celis, 'Los guardacostas de Cartagena de Indias y la defensa del virreinato del Nuevo Reino de Granada, 1788–1808' (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Seville, 2013), 99–102.

78. Sergio Paolo Solano, 'Sistema de defensa, artesanado y sociedad en el Nuevo Reino de Granada: El caso de Cartagena de Indias', *Memorias*, 19 (2013), 103.

79. AGI, Santa Fe, 1103, 1207, 1208, 1209, 1210, 1211, 1212, 1227, 1228, 1229, 1230, 1231, Main Treasury of the Royal Treasury.

defence system, including the expansion of the naval base. By 1772, there were already two frigates and four sloops, with a total of more than 600 sailors, gunners and naval officers, in the coastguard service in Cartagena.⁸⁰ By 1786, these numbers had increased dramatically, with one frigate, two schooners and four brigs in service off the coast of Cartagena, and another five schooners, four sloops and four gunboats patrolling the coast of the Darien.⁸¹ It was around this time when the captain and coastguard commander, Juan Álvarez de Veriñas, proposed to increase naval defence and protection of the waters between Cumaná and the Darien using Cartagena as a naval base, an endeavour that would demand no less than 25 small vessels – sloops, galliots and gunboats – with a total of 1,116 men.⁸² Also on this occasion, the lack of funds rendered this project unfeasible.

The eighteenth-century spending and expansion cycle, supported to a large extent by funds and revenues external to Cartagena, had a positive impact on the levels of maritime employment in the city. During the 1770s but mainly after 1780 until the end of the century, the adaptation of the port and the repairs of ships and weapons, as well as the construction of the docks and marine breakwaters, generated a growing number of specialized and unspecialized employment opportunities, with almost 500 craftsmen and journeymen directly employed by the naval base and subsidiary industries.⁸³ By 1809, the naval base's budget had reached the remarkable sum of 336,222 pesos, of which 11 per cent corresponded to the payment of wages to crews, garrisons and brigades of the coastguard ships, and 38.5% to the payment to the *asentistas* that supplied the port with raw materials and provisions from all over the Caribbean.⁸⁴

These numbers stand as one of the positive impacts that the military institution, and specifically the naval defence system, had on Cartagena. Although military spending – and therefore its financing – has traditionally been considered a liability for the royal and local treasuries, the investment in local shipbuilding, ship repairs and victualing must be viewed as a source of economic prosperity for specialized and non-specialized workers. The steady payment of wages to military and naval personnel resulted in a revitalization of the local and regional economies, with a steady increase in local trades and high demand for urban goods and services. Simultaneously, the supplies coming from abroad – iron, rigging, canvas, and so on – encouraged the use of specialized labour, which in turn inflated wages. On the whole, carpenters, blacksmiths, painters and rope makers received higher wages than unskilled workers, and, more importantly, they performed work on a constant basis, instead of being engaged in temporary or seasonal labour. For example, in 1787, in the routeing and beaconing of two sloops, 18 carpenters and caulkers were employed for eight days, while the same work on a frigate employed 16 caulkers for 12 days.⁸⁵ These tasks were performed throughout the year, generating a continuous flow of income. Likewise, the constant demand for raw materials maintained

80. AGI, Santa Fe, 1095, Coastguard State of Force, 20 July 1772.

81. AGI, Santa Fe, 914, Report, 12 April 1786.

82. AGI, Panama, 262, Report, 3 June 1786.

83. Solano, 'Sistema de defensa', 108.

84. Solano, 'Sistema de defensa', 110.

85. Solano de las Aguas, 'El apostadero', 227.

and sustained industrial production and trade. For example, in 1799, 250 quintals of tar, 100 quintals of nails, 20 quintals of iron and 200 sheets of copper were ordered from Havana.⁸⁶

Despite the enormous budgetary tensions and the logistical limitations of Cartagena, the naval effort could be paid thanks to the creation of monopolies, such as in *estanco* ('tobacco') after 1764, and the increase in customs revenues due to commercial liberalization. Between 1764 and 1809, tobacco revenues alone generated 3,127,882 pesos in profits for the treasury in Cartagena,⁸⁷ which were largely invested in military defence. However, even with a strong increase in revenues, the financing of the naval system was put under strain, mainly in times of warfare. Between 1782 and 1788, the local treasury had a deficit of more than 1.5 million pesos, with the main cause being its naval system, with an expenditure of 224,827 pesos in 1786, 180,814 pesos in 1787 and 132,553 pesos in 1788.⁸⁸ Only an urgent request for external remittances was able to balance the public expenditure. In this case, in addition to the usual payments from Santa Fe and Quito, the authorities in Cartagena resorted to petitioning for funds from Popayán.

It might have been expected that those who most benefited from the protection of the coastguard – the merchant class and the inhabitants of Cartagena – would contribute to the exhausted treasury. Between 1789 and 1799, the most prominent merchants and wealthy inhabitants contributed 321,544 pesos to cover a large part of the public debt.⁸⁹ In 1799, Cosme de Carranza, the commander of the naval base, asked the powerful Consulate of Cartagena to financially support the purchase of rigging, canvas, tar and pitch for the coastguard, since the warehouses were empty of stock, against fair payment – a promise he was unable to keep.⁹⁰

Debt plagued the dealings between the naval and military authorities and the inhabitants of Cartagena. The expedition to the Darien in the 1780s, whose actions were essentially naval, brought about a loss of 1,620,781 pesos, which remained unpaid until at least 1795.⁹¹ The continued difficulties of the Cartagena treasury and the rising levels of debt to local inhabitants resulted in a request from the viceroy of Nueva Granada to exempt Cartagena from the obligation to remit funds to Spain, as a means to alleviate local debt levels.⁹²

Notwithstanding the increasing levels of debt, naval expenditure remained an imperative. Endemic warfare during the last quarter of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century intensified financial tensions in Cartagena.⁹³ During this period,

86. Archivo General de Marina, Expediciones a Indias, 4, Report, 29 June 1799.

87. AGI, Santa Fe, 1008, 1009, 1103, 1104, 1105, 1106, 1107, 1207, 1208, 1209, 1210, 1211, 1212, 1227, 1228, 1229, 1230, 1231, Main Treasury of the Royal Treasury.

88. AGI, Santa Fe, 1102, 1103, 1104, Main Treasury of the Royal Treasury.

89. AGI, Santa Fe, 1102, 1103, 1104, Main Treasury of the Royal Treasury.

90. Archivo General de Marina, Expediciones a Indias, 27, Doc. 11, 25 February 1799.

91. Manzanilla Celis, 'Los guardacostas', 401.

92. AGI, Santa Fe, 906, Viceroy José de Ezpeleta, 19 November 1789.

93. Allan J. Kuethe and Kenneth J. Andrien, *The Spanish Atlantic World during the Eighteenth Century: Bourbon Warfare and Reforms, 1713–1796* (Bogotá, 2018), 21–8.

not only Great Britain, but also France was hostile to Spanish sovereignty in the Caribbean, and naval expenses reached astronomical figures, leaving Cartagena in technical bankruptcy. Between 1788 and 1808, the Cartagena naval system cost 5,157,790 pesos, about 10 per cent of Cartagena's total revenue.⁹⁴ After 1790 and as a measure to curb expenses, the number of ships operating out of Cartagena decreased, forcing the authorities of Santa Marta to contribute with what they could to the weakened treasury.⁹⁵ Likewise, it was decided to send several ships to Havana,⁹⁶ whose financial muscle was apparently stronger than that of Cartagena. Although the revenue from privateering between 1761 and 1809 amounted to 457,124 pesos,⁹⁷ this income was insufficient to cover the debts incurred. Despite the desperate attempts of the Naval Board to have the residents of Cartagena make extraordinary payments after 1798, they were only able to contribute 41,000 pesos.⁹⁸

Curiously, most of the coastguard's expenses arose from wages. The costs for labour were by far the biggest expense of the military administration of Cartagena. Various reports on the costs of ships between 1789 and 1796 demonstrate that the wages of seamen and officers, on average, accounted for 46 per cent of all expenditure, the rest being divided among supplies, rations and other expenses.⁹⁹ Moreover, the salaries were inflated. The commander of the naval base was paid more than 1,900 pesos per annum, while the frigate's ensign received 230 pesos and a simple sailor 62 pesos. Considering that one *arroba* of beef (almost 12 kilogrammes) cost 11 *reales* (that is, less than one peso),¹⁰⁰ and one *arroba* of flour did not exceed two pesos,¹⁰¹ real wages were relatively high. It is perhaps for this reason that Cartagena never had a shortage of labourers.

Conclusion

The naval defence of Cartagena de Indias, and especially its coastguard system, represented an almost residual element of the local military administration in comparison with the expenditure on fortifications, permanent garrisons and militias. In absolute terms, the naval defence accounted for a mere eight per cent of the total military expenditure, with costs concentrated in the period after 1757.¹⁰² However, shipbuilding and repairs, as well as coastguard tasks, had a significant impact on the colony. Maritime activities played a decisive role in the last two decades of the nineteenth century as they offered continuous and regular employment, which was only comparable to the

94. Manzanilla Celis, 'Los guardacostas', 407.

95. AGI, Santa Fe, 906, Naval Board, 18 March 1790.

96. Manzanilla Celis, 'Los guardacostas', 420.

97. AGI, Santa Fe, 1097, 1098, 1099, 1100, 1101, 1102, 1103, 1207, 1208, 1209, 1210, 1211, 1212, 1227, 1228, 1229, 1230, 1231, Main Treasury of the Royal Treasury.

98. Archivo General de Marina, Consignaciones, 7212, Report, 1 April 1798.

99. Archivo General de Marina, Consignaciones, 7207.

100. The *arroba* is a similar unit of weight to the bushel.

101. AGI, Santa Fe, 1102; AGI, Cuba, 727, Treasury Books.

102. Serrano Álvarez, *Fortificaciones*, 276–7.


labour offered by the system of fortifications. Employment in the coastguard and its supporting activities, as well as the wages of the crews, played a crucial role in the development of an urban market driven by high real wages.

The positive impact of the coastguard on the local economy was overshadowed by the permanent lack of revenue and funds to maintain the naval defence, with the consequent imposition of constraints on the expansion of maritime and naval activities. The authorities failed to allocate specific revenue streams to support these efforts. This situation only changed with an increase in revenue after the 1780s and the implementation of commercial liberalism after 1778, a measure that increased the number of ships calling at Cartagena and subsequently its capacity to capture income through commercial taxation. This new revenue was accompanied by a sharp increase in financial remittances from Spanish American authorities in Santa Fe and Quito. These exogenous remittances to the Cartagena treasury facilitated higher spending and helped to decrease the level of indebtedness incurred by the local treasury. Although the debts of the military administration of Cartagena exceeded one million pesos by 1800 – of which 30 per cent corresponded to its naval system – only the beginning of the process of independence after 1810 put an end to external transfers, resulting in the collapse of public revenue – a development that rendered Cartagena's naval defence inoperative.

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