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Las galeras de Tierra Firme (1578–1612). Fiscalidad, comercio, abastecimiento y proyección del poder naval castellano en el Caribe Sur, written by Sebastián Amaya Palacios

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Sebastián Amaya Palacios. *Las galeras de Tierra Firme (1578–1612). Fiscalidad, comercio, abastecimiento y proyección del poder naval castellano en el Caribe Sur*. Sevilla: Grupo de Universidades Iberoamericanas, La Rábida – Universidad Internacional de Andalucía, 2023, 304 pp. ISBN: 978-84-7993-385-2 (PDF).

Towards the end of the sixteenth century, several squadrons of Mediterranean oared galleys became part of the defense policy of the Spanish imperial state in the Caribbean. One particular Caribbean port, Cartagena de Indias, became the base of several successive galley squadrons. Although limited in number and ineffective in combat, the galleys left an imprint on the city and on its inhabitants. This history, usually only known to specialists in early modern Caribbean history, is the subject of *Las galeras de Tierra Firme (1578–1612)*. This book is the result of Amaya Palacios's master's thesis at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia–Medellín. This is a free access book that did not have a physical release, and some of the material published here has appeared earlier in Spanish journals. This is an ambitious work by a young scholar that attempts to build on the concept of the early modern fiscal-military state to analyze Castilian expenditures in the southwestern Caribbean port of Cartagena de Indias in the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries. As the author states in the introduction (20), the book aims to be a work of economic military history, based on a methodology that involves carefully reading the underused accounting records of the “Contaduría” section of the Archivo General de Indias in Seville, Spain.

The book is divided in four chapters. The first two (“Proyección mercantil y colonización de Tierra Firme” and “La Carrera de Indias y las remesas americanas”) analyze the economic situation of Cartagena at the end of the sixteenth century and the complex system of remittances of New World bullion that the Castilian Crown used to finance naval defense operations in the Caribbean. These two chapters contain summarized information of the way Spanish imperial finances worked in the sixteenth century. As the author clearly states, an understanding of these fiscal mechanisms is fundamental to understand how naval defense in the Caribbean was financed (112). Amaya Palacios shows a great command of the historiography published in Spanish and a deep knowledge of the financing and accounting of the Spanish empire. However, the book as a whole would have benefitted if the author had centered on developing arguments that elaborated on the links between the Caribbean and other parts of the Spanish empire.

The discussion of the galleys themselves begins in the third chapter, titled “Las galeras de Cartagena de Indias”. After a (perhaps longer than necessary) discussion of the military and technical aspects of galleys in the

Mediterranean, Amaya Palacios begins the discussion of the transportation of these vessels to the Caribbean. Although this Mediterranean background is important to understand the technical and military ecosystem in which the galleys developed, the author could have highlighted more the relevance of this topic to the Caribbean galley system. The author delves into the Caribbean side of things by discussing the pleas of Spanish Caribbean authorities who requested vessels to the Crown starting in the late 1560s until the delivery of the first galleys to Cartagena in 1578 (133–140). Like in other chapters, the author connects the local Caribbean dynamics to the global trends of transatlantic bullion imports.

The final chapter of the book (“Operatividad militar: Personal, reparaciones, y aprovisionamiento”) presents what is perhaps the author’s most original and valuable contribution: an analysis of the correlation between the royal revenue collected in Cartagena and its province and the Crown defense expenditures that, starting in the late sixteenth century, aimed to protect the port city. Additionally, the archival sources that Amaya Palacios uses allow him to recover the names and occupations of Cartageneros who contracted with royal officials to supply and service the oared vessels. Using these materials, the author presents valuable insights about the need of transporting products like tar, timber, or tallow used for ship maintenance. Those maintenance needs created commercial links between Cartagena, its hinterland, and other parts of the Caribbean. Likewise, Amaya identifies a number of men forced to work in carpentry labor (194–196), which provides an insight into the world of Caribbean laborers in this period. A discussion of the coerced labor embodied in the oarsmen also appears later in the chapter. This chapter presents a great deal of analysis of price movements of naval stores, and perhaps the author could have ventured a stronger argument that linked royal treasury movements to the logistics of the galleys and to Spanish defense policy in general.

Las galeras de Tierra Firme is a valuable addition to the growing historiography about the early modern Spanish Caribbean, specifically in regards to the understudied naval and nautical problems of the Spanish imperial state. Amaya Palacios has written a book that analyzes a crucial period of Caribbean history and presents solid insights about the fiscal and maritime history of a relatively unknown episode in Spanish naval defense. Although the two first chapters focus on the administrative and fiscal configuration of Cartagena’s treasury in the sixteenth century, somewhat diluting the main topic of the book, the second half of the book makes truly valuable contributions to the early history of a Caribbean region that has received a lot of fragmentary attention. The author gives a clear chronology of the different galley squads that arrived to the Caribbean, which will surely be useful to other scholars of

early Spanish naval defense policy and early modern naval logistics. As a final observation, the book would have benefitted from engaging with more recent secondary literature, in particular that published in English, that has increased our understanding of the Spanish galleys.¹

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- ¹ See, for example, Max Deardorff, 'Imperial Justice, Colonial Power: Pedro Vique y Manrique, the Galley Captain of Cartagena de Indias, 1578–1607,' *Colonial Latin American Historical Review* 17, no. 2 (2008): 117–41; David Wheat, "Mediterranean Slavery, New World Transformations: Galley Slaves in the Spanish Caribbean, 1578–1635," *Slavery & Abolition* 31, no. 3 (2010): 327–44; Roxana Nakashima, "Galleys in the Caribbean According to English Travel Accounts and Images," *International Journal of Maritime History* 29, no. 3 (2017): 495–512.