

Shipbuilding in times of war: Contracts for the construction of ships and provision of supplies in the Spanish Empire in the early seventeenth century

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Abstract

In the early seventeenth century, the construction of galleons and high seas warships became an essential strategic concern for the king of Spain, even more so than in the previous century. In 1603, Philip III ordered the establishment of a Committee for the Building of Ships (*Junta para la Fábrica de Navíos*), which signed several contracts (*asientos*) with private individuals to build squadrons and ships. What were the shipbuilding conditions outlined in contracts signed under the auspices of such a committee? By addressing this question, this research note sheds light on the shipbuilding strategies of the Spanish Crown before the Twelve Years' Truce (1609–1621). The notes are part of an ongoing research project on the Spanish Empire's political restructuring of shipbuilding policies during the first half of the seventeenth century.

Keywords

asientos, Philip III, shipbuilding, Spanish Empire, timber

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On 14 January 1603, Philip III, who had ascended the throne of the Hispanic Monarchy in 1598, ordered the establishment of a Committee for the Building of Ships (*Junta para la Fábrica de Navíos*) dependent on the Councils of War and Finance of the Hispanic Monarchy. The king made this decision in a particular political and military moment. In 1601, the Spanish Empire repelled in Almería an attack mounted by a squadron composed of nine Dutch, French and Scottish ships. In 1602, it suffered defeats in the battle of Nieuwpoort against the troops of the United Provinces, as well as in Kinsale (Ireland) against the English, and failed in its attempt to take Ostend.¹ Under these circumstances, the management of shipbuilding and of supplies and victuals for the warships of the royal fleets became an essential strategic element in the expansion of the empire, or at least in the maintenance of its boundaries.

Throughout the seventeenth century, in Spain, as in other European countries, there were two main ways of funding shipbuilding and the provision of supplies for fleets: either through a system of direct administration, in which the crown directly financed and managed shipbuilding and provisioning, or through a system of *asientos* (contracts) with private entrepreneurs, in which private individuals financed shipbuilding under the supervision of the crown. The *asientos* became more common than direct administration from the late sixteenth century onwards.² What were the shipbuilding conditions outlined in the 1600s contracts signed under the auspices of such a committee? This research note, which is part of an ongoing research project on the political restructuring of shipbuilding policies of the Hispanic Empire during the first half of the seventeenth century, is mainly based on analysis of a number of shipbuilding *asientos* signed by the monarchy and private individuals.

In the early seventeenth century, naval activity became the centrepiece of the Spanish imperial war machine. Proportions of royal expenditure on the Atlantic fleet and the Mediterranean galleys, as well as personnel in these two areas, constantly rose from the late sixteenth century to the 1630s.³ The Spanish king's efforts to improve the performance of the Iberian navy were also centred on the search for institutional mechanisms that could enhance the effectiveness of decision-making regarding all issues related to shipbuilding and the supply of seamen, provisions and munitions. Thus, the creation of a Committee for the Building of Ships should be situated in that context.

The establishment of the committee was not an anomaly in the politico-institutional assemblage of the Hispanic Monarchy. On the contrary, the creation of a committee comprising some of the most direct collaborators of the king, dependent on one or several existing councils and entrusted with specific executive tasks, had become a common

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1. Bernardo García García, 'Ostende, Kinsale y Argel: Tres empresas para Felipe III', in Óscar Recio Morales et al., eds., *Irlanda y la Monarquía Hispánica: Kinsale 1601–2001: Guerra, política, exilio y religión* (Madrid, 2002), 225–54; Rubén González Cuerva, *Baltasar de Zúñiga: Una encrucijada de la Monarquía Hispánica (1561–1622)* (Madrid, 2012), 153–4.
 2. Carla Rahn Phillips, *Six Galleons for the King of Spain: Imperial Defense in the Early Seventeenth Century* (Baltimore, MD and London, 1986), 27–8; David Goodman, *Spanish Naval Power, 1589–1665: Reconstruction and Defeat* (Cambridge, 2002), 31–2.
 3. I. A. A. Thompson, *War and Government in Habsburg Spain, 1560–1620* (London, 1976), 185–205 and 294–307; Goodman, *Spanish Naval Power*, 275–8.

practice during Philip II's reign (1556–1598). Like other high executive institutions formed at the time, the Committee for the Building of Ships was made up of persons who had close political, family and economic relationships with the king's favourite, the Duke of Lerma.⁴

Some historians have examined in depth the legal conditions under which shipbuilding contracts (*asientos*) were devised between the crown and private individuals.⁵ However, few scholars have considered anything more than the essence of the contract system, which was based on a loan made by the crown to the contractor, and few have offered more than lists of some of the contracts signed during the seventeenth century.

In general terms, shipbuilding *asientos* consisted of agreements between the king and contractors for the construction of a given number of vessels of different types and features. Furthermore, alongside the construction of vessels, the contractors were obliged to serve the Spanish (or Portuguese) Navy in a given period, during which all the responsibilities and financial obligations had to be accomplished by both parties.⁶ The main underlying financial mechanism at the core of these contracts was the loan received by the contractor from the king in order to provide liquidity for the shipbuilding activity. Besides the loan, the crown could cover costs such as the payment of wages, provisions and freight.

There are great similarities between the shipbuilding *asientos* in terms of structure and content of the clauses in the early years of the seventeenth century. *Asientos* signed in the framework of the committee confirm the common knowledge that the Hispanic Crown invested in an industry chiefly located along the northern Iberian coast, in Galicia (Ribadeo),⁷ and above all in Cuatro Vilas (Colindres, Guarnizo, Laredo),⁸ Biscay,⁹ and Guipúzcoa (Pasajes, Rentería, Lezo)¹⁰ – all regions with a longstanding and strong tradition in shipbuilding. However, the use of *asientos* to build warships, among them galleons, in other European spaces of the empire, such as Lisbon and Naples,¹¹ indicates a pattern in shipbuilding which depended on the dialectic between centralization within the Crown of Castile and a not always easy balance between the royal interest and the political liberties of other territories. Such tensions were the very essence of the economic and political running of the empire.

During the 1600s, the majority of shipbuilding contracts did not express an intention to reinforce a specific squadron. Nonetheless, the locations of the construction and wintering sites in areas of northern Spain suggest that the ships were to join the *Armada del*

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4. Antonio Feros, *Kingship and Favoritism in the Spain of Philip III (1598–1621)* (Cambridge, 2000), 128, 134 and 157–8.
 5. Rahn Philips, *Six Galleons*; Thompson, *War and Government*; Goodman, *Spanish Naval Power*.
 6. There were cases in which the *asiento* did not entail the building of ships but only the service. This was the case of Juan Núñez Correa's Galleons of Silver, *Archivo General Militar de Madrid* (hereafter AGMM), vol. 19, 88a–99r.
 7. AGMM, vol. 19, 173r–189r and 257r–267; AGMM, vol. 35, 123r–130v.
 8. AGMM, vol. 35, 40v–44r; AGMM, vol. 19, 77v–82v.
 9. AGMM, vol. 19, 2r–12v and 173r–189r.
 10. AGMM, vol. 19, 71r–76r and 83–87v; AGMM, vol. 18, 274–9; AGMM, vol. 22, 196r–199r.
 11. AGMM, vol. 19, 57v–66r and 173r–189r.

Mar Océano, which by the early seventeenth century had become the main defensive priority of the Spanish king due to increasing military perils in the Atlantic.¹² An exceptional case is the 1604 contract with the Portuguese Manuel Gomes de Acosta, which ordered the construction of a fleet of nine galleons, two *pataches* and two *galizabras* in Galicia, Biscay or Portugal. The fleet would serve in the navy of Portugal, 'or in any other navy that I [the King] order'.¹³

The clauses of the contracts confirm the perception of the galleon as the quintessential vessel of Spanish naval power. In fact, the galleon was the product ordered in nearly all the *asientos*, accompanied by *pataches* and *galizabras* in some fleets.¹⁴ Instructions for the construction of skiffs also feature in some contracts.¹⁵ The number of vessels on the order ranged from a single galleon to a maximum of 14 different vessels, with most *asientos* composed of eight or nine galleons.

The main text of a shipbuilding *asiento* gives detailed guidelines for the shipbuilding process and a final list of the vessels and their characteristics. The instructions stipulate measures for each vessel as well as other specific features. An essential clause referred to the timber to be used in construction. The strategic importance of wood explains why the conservation of forests and management of wood supply for shipbuilding had become a principal political concern in the Iberian kingdoms since the Middle Ages.¹⁶ Descriptions of the quality, origin and use of timber are evident in most contracts of the 1600s. There is no mention of the geographic origin of the timber used to construct the hull of galleons and other vessels during those years. Nonetheless, in general terms, the contract supports the idea that wood used for the construction of the hull came from regions as close as possible to the shipyards. Most *asientos* related to galleons and lesser boats to be built in northern Spain, so that hull timber was assuredly Cantabrian oak.¹⁷ Although *asientos* of the 1600s do not mention the origin of masts, they usually came from Baltic countries through Dutch networks.¹⁸

The two cases of *asientos* for the construction of ships in Naples and Portugal have some particularities. The Neapolitan *asiento*, signed with Jorge de Oliste in 1603 to build 12 galleons in Naples, specified that the ships were to be constructed with 'strong wood' – a requirement that does not appear in contemporary *asientos* signed in Biscay or Guipúzcoa.¹⁹

12. Thompson, *War and Government*, 31–7; Magdalena De Pazzis Pi Corrales, 'La Armada de los Austrias', *Estudis: Revista de Historia Moderna*, 23 (2001), 23–52.

13. AGMM, vol. 19, 173r–189r.

14. AGMM, vol. 19, 2r–12v and 173r–189r.

15. AGMM, vol. 19, 173r–189r and 274–9.

16. John T. Wing, *Roots of Empire: Forest and State Power in Early Modern Spain, c.1500–1750* (Leiden, 2015); Alfredo José Martínez González, *Las Superintendencias de Montes y Plantíos (1574–1748): Derechos y Política Forestal para las Armadas en la Edad Moderna* (Valencia, 2015).

17. AGMM, vol. 19, 102–5.

18. Carmen Sanz Ayán, 'Negociadores y Capitales Holandeses en los Sistemas de Abastecimiento de Pertrechos Navales de la Monarquía Hispánica Durante el Siglo XVII', *Hispania*, LII (1992), 915–45.

19. 'Jorge de Oliste is committed to build 12 galleons in the city of Naples [...] with strong wood (*fuertes de madera y tablazón*)': *Archivo del Museo Naval* (hereafter AMN), vol. 19, 57v.

This reference, which appears in several parts of the contract,²⁰ suggests that the king was concerned about the timber quality of the galleons constructed in Naples. The latter *asiento* allowed the shipbuilder to cut better-quality trees in pine forests of royal property – with corresponding permission given by the purveyor (*proveedor*) of the king, who guaranteed that the contractor did not cut more trees than were needed for shipbuilding.²¹ Such clauses were not only a reflection of doubts about the inferior thickness and durability of oak wood in Lisbon and Naples and their surrounding areas. They were also a product of institutions in charge of supervising shipbuilding that differed from Castile's Superintendence of Shipbuilding and Plantations – an official appointed by the viceroy in the case of Naples, and a royal purveyor in the case of Portugal – which entailed different institutional arrangements in the monitoring of shipbuilding.

The instructions also contain considerations about other essential elements, such as sails, cables, anchors, rope for ringing, hemp and yarn, as well as artillery, bullets and gunpowder. Furthermore, additional directives were given regarding basic equipment of the vessels, such as victuals, daily allowances and medicines. During the 1600s, these provisions were on the account of the crown, which in most cases provided it directly. *Asientos* signed to build galleons and other vessels in Naples and Lisbon were exceptional for geographical and political reasons. In the contract with Jorge de Oliste, the goods for the first voyage, from the shipyard to Cadiz, would be supplied by the crown.²² The contract to build a Portuguese fleet in 1604 stipulated that the crown would pay 88,000 *escudos* every eight months to supply the provisions to be delivered by the contractor.²³

The recruitment of seamen and officers was the natural extension of the construction of the vessel, and thus it was a responsibility of the contractors. If there was a shortage of crew members, however, the crown had the right to recruit seafarers to make up the shortfall; otherwise, the ship would not sail and the wages payable up to that point would have been lost. An exception was made in the 1604 contract for the Portuguese Navy, which stipulated that the contractor was obliged to enlist the officers, whereas the rest of the crew was recruited by the crown.²⁴

After the end of the contract, vessels commonly served in the Spanish *Carrera de Indias*, which could provide some benefits for the masters or captains, such as the right to own eight tons of the cargo out of 100. In the case of the Portuguese fleet, however, this possibility was not allowed. For example, Gomes de Acosta's contract explicitly excluded the Indies of Castile and Portugal,²⁵ which in effect meant a prohibition on using the ships for commercial purposes.

The Committee for the Building of Ships was disbanded in 1607. As in its establishment, there were political as well as strategic reasons for the termination of the

20. AMN, vol. 19, 65r.

21. AGMM, vol. 19, 174v.

22. AGMM, vol. 19, 57v–66r.

23. AGMM, vol. 19, 173r–189r.

24. AGMM, vol. 19, 2–12, 57r–66r, 71r–105r, 173r–189r and 257a–262r; AGMM, vol. 22, 196r–199r.

25. AGMM, vol. 19, 173r–189r.

committee. The main cause was the venality of several members of the committee, who conducted contract policies within the *Junta*, leading to several charges of high-level corruption against them and the Duke of Lerma.²⁶

To what extent did the conditions of shipbuilding *asientos* change over time? This question will be answered when our ongoing research sheds light on the contracts signed by new shipbuilding institutions created by the king in later periods – the Committee of Shipbuilders (*Junta de Constructores*) in 1610, and the Committee of Fleets (*Junta de Armadas*) in early 1620.

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26. Feros, *Kingship and Favoritism*, 169–80.