Introducing Spanish State Forestry

The Widow’s Oak and the Spanish State in the Valley of Carriedo

In the hours before dawn on October 7, 1740, in the northern Spanish town of Selaya (Cantabria), Juan de Cuero y Arze started cutting down his neighbor’s oak tree. The tree had grown large enough to block sunlight to de Cuero’s garden, and he required assistance from several men to remove it, including Vicente de la Concha, the acting mayor of the town. The disturbance awoke the widow Catalina de Pando, the owner of the tree. When she and her children looked outside, the men threw stones at them, knocking down and seriously injuring the “poor helpless widow of the highest valor.”¹ The men finished removing the tree, and Catalina de Pando soon took the men to court for the damages they caused that night. In the past, or in another part of Castile, this kind of dispute would have remained a matter to be settled by municipal authorities. However, the case of the widow’s oak wound up at the royal junta of the navy in Madrid, which was overseen by Zenón de Somodevilla, the Marqués de la Ensenada, who would soon become the most powerful minister in the Spanish empire.² Why did the removal of a single oak tree in this town capture the attention of Ensenada and the Spanish navy’s top decision-makers? The full answer to this begins with the origins of naval forest regulation in Spain, when a shift in the crown’s interest in trees occurred in the sixteenth century initiating numerous efforts to protect and enhance shipbuilding timber supplies. Such efforts over the course of the ensuing era of imperial expansion and defense led to increased bureaucratic oversight, forest reconnaissance missions to locate new supplies, more intensive mapping of the monarchy’s resources, and new laws and regulations, all of which contributed to the enhancement of state and naval power. As this case illustrates, state officials had grown concerned with the condition of certain forests down to individual trees by the mid-eighteenth century, so that the lost potential worth of Catalina

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1. Archivo General de Simancas (Hereafter, AGS), Secretaría del Despacho de la Marina (Hereafter, Marina), Legajo (Hereafter, leg.) 553, Guarnizo, June 15, 1741, Jacinto Navarrete. Other documents related to this case are in the same legajo.

de Pando’s oak to the nearby naval shipyards and iron foundries, regardless of the injuries sustained by the widow, made the case a matter of concern for Ensenada. In the end, Ensenada ordered the case to be handled by Manuel García Gómez, the top naval minister of the region, who ordered Juan de Cuero y Arze and his accomplices to plant another oak tree of the same quality in the very same location at their own cost.3 The culprits completed this task the following June of 1741 in the presence of a notary. This decision did little to help Catalina de Pando in the short term, but it served to reinforce a long-term investment for naval interests, which rested on the hopes of benefitting from sturdy timber in the coming generations.

What follows traces the development of naval forest regulation policies underpinning one of the world’s first truly global empires. It examines how the problem of a perceived crisis related to shipbuilding timber scarcity was identified, interpreted, and addressed within the Spanish monarchy by pursuing a history of one of the earliest and largest bureaucracies dedicated to forest use regulation in the early modern world. The storied galleys, caravels, galleons, and frigates of Spain’s early modern empire defended sea lanes and transported settlers, slaves, plants, animals, and treasure around the world. The importance of these voyages for Spain and world history is well known, but how the Spanish were able to meet the material demands of supporting its maritime fleets is less well known. Access to shipbuilding timber became one of the foundations of Spain’s maritime presence, and from the sixteenth century the crown began taking a more active role in prioritizing its interests in strategically located forests. The crown’s forest policies did not arise solely from motives of imperial defense, but the protection of its maritime connections remained a high priority for Spain during the early modern era. European rivals, economic contraction, and inadequate resources tested the integrity and security of the global monarchy, and forest conservation continued to evolve over time in its legal and administrative formulations to adjust to such challenges.

The significance of the Spanish case rests not only on its sizable naval material demands, but also on its relatively early development of long-term conservation efforts – a topic that has not received the dedicated attention it deserves, particularly in English.4 In 1748, Spain issued its first national forestry codes,