Spain sought to prevent the infiltration of foreigners into its territories and prevent contraband trade, so up until Antonio Fernández de Elvas’s *asiento* of 1615 slave traders, who were nearly always foreigners, were only allowed to land the slaves and were not permitted to trade them inland.¹ The slave trade across the Atlantic thus came to be controlled by slave traders who were largely distinct from those who handled the trade within Spanish America.

During the period of the Portuguese *asientos* Cartagena was one of three ports in Spanish America where slaves could be landed legally, the other two being Veracruz and Buenos Aires. Relatively few licences were issued to land slaves at Buenos Aires and many of those that entered there and in the Caribbean did so illegally.² Cartagena was also one of the three mainland ports to which Spanish fleets were authorised to sail when the fleet system was established in 1552, the others being Portobello and Veracruz.³ Portobello was the main focus of the galleon trade since it was here that European merchandise was exchanged for Peruvian silver. However, because the Caribbean coast of Panama was considered unhealthy, the fleets only stopped there for the duration of the annual fair, which lasted only a few weeks. Partly for the same reason, slaves destined for South America were traded in Cartagena rather than Panama. Also favouring the development of the main slave market at Cartagena rather than Portobello was pressure from investors in the transatlantic sector of the trade who wanted the slaves to be landed as quickly as possible to prevent further losses and realise their profits. The journey to Portobello would take an additional nine to ten days. Cartagena was not only the region’s most active slave market but also the main legal entry point for slaves for all destinations in South America.

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in the barracoons of cartagena

America. Although at this time some ships touched land before arriving in Cartagena, this was usually in emergencies or to participate in contraband trade rather than to allow the slaves to recover from the transatlantic journey. Under later asientos slave traders used intermediate stopping points in the Caribbean where the slaves were ‘refreshed’ before being transferred to mainland ports.4

Cartagena possessed an excellent natural harbour, but initially it was not well placed to function as a major port and trading centre due to its small population and its relatively underdeveloped hinterland. At the time of Spanish conquest the native population of the province of Cartagena may have been about 90,000 to 100,000 or about 30,000 tributaries,5 but due to epidemics and excessive tribute and labour demands by the early seventeenth century it had fallen by over 90 percent. A visita by the oidor of Audiencia of Santa Fe, Juan de Villabona y Zubiarre, in 1611 found only 1,569 tributaries in the region.6 While the native population declined the number of traders and merchants increased, such that the number of vecinos in Cartagena rose from 250 in the 1570s7 to more than 1,500 in the 1630s, by which time the city extended beyond the walls to Getsemani.8 The latter figure excluded Mestizos, Mulattoes, free Blacks and other nationalities. As African slaves became more readily available they were employed in a wide range of urban services and as household servants.9 About the same time Father Simón

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4 Chandler, “Health and Slavery,” 94; Vega Franco, Tráfico de esclavos, 94–100.
6 This extensive visita is to be found in AGNB Colonia Visitas de Bolívar y Boyacá I, IV and AGI Santa Fe 166. A useful account of the visita, including a transcription of the ordinances issued, is to be found in Lola G. Luna, Resguardos coloniales de Santa Marta y Cartagena y resistencia indígena (Bogotá: Fondo de Promoción de la Cultura del Banco Popular, 1993), 46–54, 205–253. See also Julián Ruiz Rivera, Los indios de Cartagena bajo la administración española en el siglo XVII (Bogotá: Archivo General de la Nación, 1995), 24–41.
8 AGI Santa Fe 228 N7 Fray Luis de Cordova Ronquillo 10 Aug. 1634; Vázquez de Espinosa, Compendio, 219–20. A detailed account of the householders and economic activities associated with 160 plots in Getsemani is to be found in AGI Santa Fe 39 R2 N7 doc 2 Relación del sitio y asiento de Gegemani 24 Jul. 1620.
9 Vidal Ortega, Cartagena de Indias en la articulación del espacio, 51.