



# "THE BESIEGED MARACAIBO LAGOON: THE SCOURGE OF CARIBBEAN PIRATES (1614 - 1678)"



Fundación Ediciones

Clío



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# THE BESIEGED MARACAIBO LAGOON

The Scourge of Caribbean Pirates  
(1614 - 1678)

Clío Editions Foundation  
Office of the Chronicler of Maracaibo  
History Academy of Zulia State

Maracaibo – Venezuela 2025

This book is the final product of the research project: *The Besieged Lagoon of Maracaibo: The Scourge of Pirates in the Caribbean (1614-1678)*, whose principal investigator was Dr. Jorge Vidovic; a project registered and endorsed by the Office of the Chronicler of Maracaibo, dated March 18, 2025, according to Official Letter Number 06-2025.

## **The Besieged Maracaibo lagoon : The Scourge of Caribbean Pirates (1614 - 1678)**

Jorge Fymark Vidovic López (author).



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Office of the Chronicler of Maracaibo

History Academy of Zulia State

July 2025

Maracaibo, Venezuela

1st edition

**Depósito Legal:** ZU2025000237

**ISBN:** 978-980-451-074-8

**ISBN(Amazon):**

Cover design: Janibeth Maldonado

Layout: Julio César García Delgado

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The Besieged Lagoon of Maracaibo: The Scourge of Pirates in the Caribbean (1614-1678) / Jorge Fymark Vidovic López (author).

— 1st digital edition — Maracaibo (Venezuela). Office of the Chronicler of Maracaibo / Clío Editions Foundation / History Academy of Zulia State / 2025.

84 pages; 20.3 cm

ISBN: 978-980-451-074-8

1. Piracy, 2. Privateering, 3. Maracaibo, 4. Colonial defense, 5. Collective memory.

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The work *The Besieged Lagoon of Maracaibo: The Scourge of Pirates in the Caribbean (1614-1678)*, authored by Jorge Vidovic, is part of the research line: Historical Events and Processes. Thanks to the talent and persistent work of researchers like Jorge Vidovic, the people of Maracaibo have the opportunity to learn an important part of their history. May the reading of this book contribute to such a noble purpose.

Dr. Reyber Antonio Parra Contreras  
Chronicler of Maracaibo.

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# Introduction



Hondius, Henricus. ca. 1630. *Venezuela, parte Australi Novæ Andalusiae*. Amsterdam: Hondius-Janssonius.  
Accessed on July 20, 2025. <https://www.wdl.org/es/item/11353/>.<sup>1</sup>

- This map, entitled *Venezuela, parte Australi Novæ Andalusiae*, was drawn up by the Dutch cartographer Henricus Hondius around 1630. It is part of the Flemish cartographic tradition of the seventeenth century, notable for its technical precision and aesthetic value. It represents the north of South America, including the current Venezuelan territory, the Gulf of Paria, the Caribbean islands and bordering regions of Nueva Andalucía. The map stands out for its decorative richness, with ornate cartouches, ships in navigation and sea monsters, common elements in the cartography of the time that

During the seventeenth century, the seas of the Western Hemisphere became the scene of growing tensions between the great European powers. Spain, France, England and the Netherlands disputed control of trade routes, strategic enclaves and natural resources through open wars and covert conflicts. In this context, piracy and privateering took on a political and economic dimension: they were transformed into tactical instruments capable of inflicting damage without the need for formal battles. The coasts and islands of the New World were recurrent targets of assaults and looting that profoundly altered colonial life.

Among the areas hardest hit by this phenomenon is Maracaibo, along with the populations settled around its lagoon. Its geographical position, the richness of its agricultural hinterland, the dynamism of Gibraltar's port and the scarce military presence, made it an attractive target for corsairs and filibusters. Between 1614 and 1678, the raids were continuous, leaving physical and symbolic scars on the territory and its people. The configuration of the lake, added to the deficiencies of the imperial defensive

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combined geographical information with symbolic and artistic elements. Its historical value lies in the fact that it reflects European knowledge about this region at an early stage of colonization, as well as the sea routes and settlements recognized by northern European navigators. It was published in Amsterdam by the Hondius-Janssonius publishing house, one of the most influential of its time.

apparatus, facilitated the entry of hostile vessels and exposed the region to systematic violence.

The purpose of this book is to provide a documented chronicle of the major attacks suffered by lake communities during that period. Through the analysis of primary and secondary sources, episodes of looting, resistance, and reorganization are reconstructed, highlighting the material, social, and cultural consequences of these events. Far from narrating a succession of isolated episodes, it aims to understand this cycle of violence as part of a broader imperial logic, in which the maritime border was conceived as both a threshold of opportunities and threats.

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*Part One:*  
*The Caribbean Context of the 17th*  
*Century*



## Chapter 1

### *Corsairs, pirates and emporiums: the Caribbean as a board of covert diplomatic disputes*



During the seventeenth century, the Caribbean was transformed into a space of geopolitical confrontation between the great European powers. The practice of privateering, defined as state authorization for private individuals to attack enemy property, was one of the key instruments of this undeclared war. Unlike illegal piracy, privateering operated under a legal framework that clothed it with legitimacy, turning privateers into semi-official agents of European monarchies <sup>2</sup>.

France, England and the Netherlands used privateering as a strategy to weaken Spanish control without the need to deploy regular armies. From bases such as Saint-Domingue, Jamaica or Curaçao, filibustering expeditions were organized that plundered ports, destroyed infrastructures and redistributed the booty in parallel markets. This irregular war allowed constant pressure to be sustained on territories such as the city of Maracaibo, key due to its strategic position in western South America <sup>3</sup>.

Corsairs, unlike common pirates, acted with legal backing. The so-called “letters of marque” issued by colonial authorities legitimized their attacks against enemies of the kingdom. Although his activity

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2 Luis Britto García, “Demons of the Sea: Pirates and Corsairs in Venezuela” (1528–1725) (Caracas: Vadell Hermanos, 2000).

3 Germán Cardozo Galué, “Maracaibo y sus piratas” (Maracaibo: Imprenta del Zulia, 1983).

could be as violent as that of the pirate, the corsair acted in the name of a crown. This legitimacy gave it the status of a combatant in war, subject to maritime rights. If he was captured, he was to be tried in naval courts, not summarily executed. In this context, French privateering played a fundamental role. The authorities of Saint-Domingue actively promoted corsair activity against Spanish places. In this sense, privateering in the French colony was not only tolerated, but promoted as a state policy, especially between 1680 and 1720. Corsairs were trained there, ships were repaired and campaigns were organized with full knowledge of the colonial power.

For Maracaibo, this scenario represented a constant threat. In the same way, the Port of Gibraltar, San Carlos and the city itself were recurrent targets of corsair fleets whose expeditions did not respond to chance, but to routes strategically traced based on information obtained from the neighboring islands. The sack carried out by L'Olonnais in 1666 and the attack led by Morgan in 1669 are paradigmatic examples of operations that responded to a logic of privateering protected by geopolitical interests<sup>4</sup>.

It should be noted that privateering was not only a form of unconventional warfare, but also an economic mechanism. The corsairs redistributed the

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4 Luis Britto García, "Demons of the Sea: Pirates and Corsairs in Venezuela (1528–1725)" (Caracas: Vadell Hermanos, 2000).

looted goods in informal markets, nurturing parallel commercial circuits that benefited the enemy powers of Spain. This clandestine circulation undermined the imperial monopoly and sustained the war economy of the adversary colonies. In this context, Maracaibo—due to its status as a port node of the western Andean-lake—was a privileged target.

Consequently, it is essential to understand how imperial structures resorted to indirect mechanisms to project their power, weaken Spanish hegemony and strengthen their own possessions. Far from constituting fortuitous episodes, the attacks suffered by Maracaibo must be interpreted as part of a legalized war in which privateering functioned as a central tool of strategic domination. Historiography distinguishes between several figures who operated in the colonial Caribbean, all linked to maritime violence, but with different legal and social meanings. The pirate was one who attacked ships or towns without authorization from any State; he acted on his own account, and was considered a universal criminal. His usual punishment was hanging, and no kingdom protected him if he was captured. He was, in short, the enemy of all.

In contrast, the privateer operated under a “letter of marque,” a document issued by a European power that authorized the attack on enemies at sea. Although his activity could be as violent as that of

the pirate, the corsair acted in the name of a crown. This legitimacy gave it the status of a combatant in war, subject to maritime rights. If he was captured, he was to be tried in naval courts, not summarily executed <sup>5</sup>.

The buccaneer, on the other hand, was originally a hunter of wild cattle and pigs in Hispaniola. Its name comes from the French term *boucan*, an indigenous method for smoking meat. However, in the second half of the seventeenth century, many buccaneers were transformed into organized looters, allaying themselves with corsairs or pirates. They were mostly French or English, settled in Tortuga or Jamaica, and staged some of the most notorious attacks in the Caribbean <sup>6</sup>.

These distinctions were not always clear in practice. Many pirates became privateers when they received a patent, and vice versa, if they continued to operate after peace was signed. The important thing was the document and the political context. Mara-

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5 The letter of marque was an official document issued by a European monarchy or state that authorized private individuals (privateers) to attack and loot enemy vessels during an armed conflict. Unlike the pirate, the privateer acted under state jurisdiction and was subject to maritime law regulations. If captured, he was to be tried as a legitimate combatant in naval courts and not as a common criminal. These patents, frequent between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, allowed European powers to externalize part of their naval power without directly assuming the costs of war.

6 Alexandre Olivier Exquemelin, "Pirates of America" (Amsterdam: Jan ten Hoorn, 1678).

caibo, as a besieged plaza, suffered attacks from all these figures: improvised buccaneers, legitimized corsairs and pirates without a flag. All of them, in the final analysis, configured a Caribbean in dispute between order and plunder <sup>7</sup>.

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7     Idem

## Chapter 2

### *The rise of piracy in the Caribbean: bases, routes and powers involved*



In the seventeenth century, the Caribbean Sea became the favorite setting for filibusters, corsairs and buccaneers, who, protected by the tensions between European powers, took advantage of the defensive weakness of the Spanish-American colonies. These groups of looters, although different in their legal nature and *modus operandi*, shared the same objective: to profit from overseas trade. The island of La Tortuga, Jamaica and Curaçao were consolidated as fundamental bases of operations, from where attacks were coordinated that were mainly directed towards the territories under Spanish rule on the mainland and the Antillean islands <sup>8</sup>.

As we have already pointed out, the presence of these corsair bases was not an accidental phenomenon, but a manifestation of the indirect support of powers such as England, France and Holland, which sought to weaken Spanish hegemony without resorting to open wars. This type of unconventional warfare allowed them to exploit resources and routes without officially committing themselves, giving rise to a hybrid conflict that profoundly altered the geopolitical dynamics of the Caribbean.<sup>9</sup>

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8 Carmen Vidales, "Corsairs and Pirates of the French Revolution in the Waters of Hispano-American Emancipation," *Caravelle*, no. 54 (1990): 247–262, <https://doi.org/10.3406/carav.1990.2428>.

9 José Luis Franco, *The Colonial Government of Cuba and the Independence of Venezuela: Conflicts and Rebellions in the Caribbean*

This illicit trade not only included goods of high economic value such as precious metals, cocoa, tobacco, sugar and indigo, but also European manufactured goods that were smuggled into the Spanish colonies, circumventing the rigid system of the imperial monopoly. The circulation of these goods consolidated a trans-imperial network of exchange that challenged official routes and weakened the Crown's authority over its own territories. In many cases, local elites tolerated—and even actively participated—in this trafficking, motivated by immediate profits and the precariousness of the legal supply. Thus, piracy not only represented a military threat, but also a structural disruption of the colonial economic order, fostering a parallel economy that linked ports such as Maracaibo with markets hostile to the Spanish monarchy.<sup>10</sup>

For their part, French privateers, in particular, played a leading role during the rise of Caribbean piracy. Following the French Revolution, these experienced sailors were integrated into Latin American independence struggles, in many cases serving nascent republics or acting as independent agents. One of the most emblematic cases was that of Victor Hugues, who institutionalized privateering as an

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(1781–1831) (Maracaibo: Ediciones Clío / Academia de Historia del Estado Zulia, 2022), 13–15.

10 Klooster, Wim. *Illicit Riches: Dutch Trade in the Caribbean, 1648–1795*. Leiden: KITLV Press, 1998.

instrument of war and trade, consolidating a piratical tradition that extended until the first decades of the nineteenth century <sup>11</sup>.

The permissiveness of the colonial authorities also favored the rise of the phenomenon. On many occasions, a lack of resources, corruption or the absence of effective surveillance allowed corsairs to act with impunity. In Maracaibo, for example, weak fortifications and limited military capacity made it easier for pirates to enter the lake and sack the city multiple times between 1614 and 1678. Documentary testimonies show that, in the face of this situation, the local population began to organize their own forms of resistance, developing improvised defense strategies <sup>12</sup>.

The strategic location of Lake Maracaibo was key to the establishment of these piratical routes. Its connection to the Caribbean Sea through the bar made it an ideal way to access the riches of the towns and cities around the lagoon, particularly cocoa, tobacco and the products of the Gibraltar fair. This structural vulnerability was well known to corsairs, who used light vessels, such as sloops and urcas, to

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11 Carmen Vidales, "Corsairs and Pirates of the French Revolution in the Waters of Hispano-American Emancipation," *Caravelle*, no. 54 (1990): 249–251, <https://doi.org/10.3406/carav.1990.2428>.

12 Elías Cardoza Sáez, "Fortification and Defense of the Maracaibo Bar in the Province of Mérida," *Tiempo y Espacio* 64 (2015): 114–129.

enter easily, taking advantage of the lack of vigilance and the slow response of the colonial authorities <sup>13</sup>.

Therefore, the rise of piracy in the Caribbean cannot be understood only as a phenomenon of maritime crime, but as part of an economic, social and political war that involved empires, merchants and colonial communities. It was a period where the line between legality and illegality became blurred, and where attacks on cities such as Maracaibo and Trujillo represented not only acts of looting, but also forms of geopolitical pressure and tools of commercial and territorial domination in the context of imperial struggles for control of the New World.

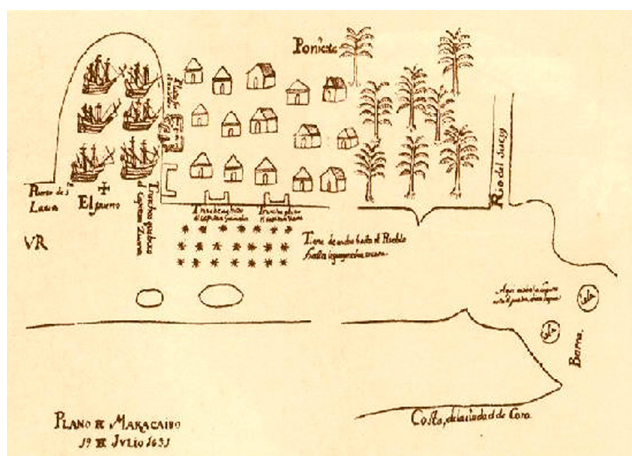
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13 Luis Alberto Ramírez Méndez, *The Promised Land of the South of Lake Maracaibo and the Town and Port of San Antonio de Gibraltar (XVI–XVII Centuries)*, Volume II (Maracaibo: Ediciones Clío, 2024), 78.



# Chapter 3

## *Maracaibo in the Seventeenth Century: Crossroads of Trade and Resistance*



Map of Maracaibo. July 19, 1631

The definitive foundation of Nueva Zamora de la Laguna de Maracaibo in 1574 consolidated the city to such an extent that it allowed the articulation of a strategic commercial network between the provinces of Venezuela in the interior and the Caribbean. The relations with Coro, El Tocuyo, Barquisimeto, Trujillo, Mérida, San Cristóbal, La Grita, Barinas and Pedraza formed an Andean-lake-maritime economic corridor that would be fundamental for regional development and, paradoxically, for its exposure to piratical incursions.<sup>14</sup>

From its first decades, Maracaibo functioned as a redistribution port. Products already mentioned such as cocoa, tobacco, sugar cane, indigo and hides were transferred to the port of San Antonio de Gibraltar, from where they were exported to Curaçao, Cartagena or the Spanish metropolis<sup>15</sup>. This function turned Maracaibo into a vital enclave of economic articulation. In turn, the mountain routes from Mérida and Trujillo supplied products such as cocoa, porcelain and wheat; while textiles, cereals,

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14 Luis Alberto Ramírez Méndez, *The Promised Land*. Volume II: Colonial Commercial Structures in the Andean-Lake Region, Maracaibo: Fundación Ediciones Clío, 2021, 40–60. / Figure: “Plano de Maracaibo, 19 de julio de 1635”, manuscript, Archivo General de Indias, Seville, Sección Mapas y Planos, Venezuela, leg. 7. Reproduced in José A. Luciani, *Maracaibo y su historia urbana* (Maracaibo: Ediciones del Rectorado de la Universidad del Zulia, 1983), s/p.

15 Arellano Moreno, J. (2001). *Economic History of Maracaibo in the Colony*. Editorial Caribe.

wood and livestock arrived from San Cristóbal, La Grita, Barinas and Pedraza <sup>16</sup>.

However, this economic integration also made the city a target for privateers. Between 1614 and 1678, both the city and the rest of the provinces around the Lake Maracaibo Lagoon were attacked by Enrique de Gerard, William Jackson, L'Olonnais, Miguel el Vasco, Henry Morgan and Grammont. These assaults disrupted trade, forced defensive reconfigurations, and motivated military alliances between Maracaibo and the Andes <sup>17</sup>. The fragility of the colonial system encouraged smuggling with Curaçao and Jamaica, which acted as an escape valve in the face of the limitations of the Spanish monopoly <sup>18</sup>.

Despite the difficulties, Maracaibo adapted. Gibraltar's fairs, held twice a year, maintained their commercial appeal. The cocoa from the south of the lake, of the porcelain variety, continued to be one of the most coveted in the Atlantic market. It should be noted that the aforementioned fairs articulated the regional economy and allowed the entry of Eu-

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16 Villalobos, A. (2001). Corsairs and trade in the Hispanic Caribbean. Andean Publishing Fund. / Luis Alberto Ramírez Méndez, La tierra prometida. Volume I: Mercantile Routes and Internal Supply in Western Venezuela, Maracaibo: Fundación Ediciones Clío, 2021, 20–40.

17 Alfredo Villalobos, Corsarios y comercio en el Caribe hispano (Mérida: Fondo Editorial Andino, 2001), 93.

18 Arauz Monfante, P. (2000). Contraband and illicit trade in the colonial Caribbean. Ediciones del Sol.

ropean products, with Mexican silver as the axis of exchange <sup>19</sup>. Throughout the seventeenth century, cocoa was the main economic engine, followed by tobacco, which from 1621 was monopolized by the Crown, generating resistance among producers <sup>20</sup>. The Dutch controlled at least 30% of Venezuelan cocoa between the 1730s and 1750s, not counting unregistered cocoa, implying that smuggling accounted for a substantial part of production <sup>21</sup>.

In addition to cocoa and tobacco, sugar cane and indigo gained prominence. The haciendas south of the lake had sugar mills to produce honey, melote and sugar, while indigo was exported as a natural dye to Europe. This set of items positioned Maracaibo as a key redistribution center between Andean production and transatlantic trade <sup>22</sup>.

Geographically, and as we have already pointed out, the bar of Lake Maracaibo—a sandy formation

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19 Luis Alberto Ramírez Méndez, *The Promised Land of the South of Lake Maracaibo. The Holy Hospital of Charity Jesus Nazareno of San Antonio de Gibraltar (XVII–XVIII Centuries)*, volume V (Maracaibo: Ediciones Clío, 2021), approx. pp. 40–60.

20 Luis Alberto Ramírez Méndez, *The Promised Land of the South of Lake Maracaibo. The Holy Hospital of Charity Jesus Nazareno of San Antonio de Gibraltar (XVII–XVIII Centuries)*, volume V (Maracaibo: Ediciones Clío, 2021), pp. 43–52.

21 Wim Klooster, *Illicit Riches: Dutch Trade in the Caribbean, 1648–1795* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1998), 185–196.

22 *Revista de Indias*. (2022). “Sugar and Indigo Production in Colonial Venezuela”. *Revista de Indias*, 82(284), 85–94

between Zapara Island and the San Carlos Peninsula—was both a strategic thoroughfare and a vulnerability. Its shallow depth favored the entry of light piratical vessels such as sloops and schooners, facilitating attacks on Maracaibo and Gibraltar <sup>23</sup>. Entry through the bar was difficult even for merchant ships, which, added to the lack of fortifications, made the city a recurring target. The Castle of San Carlos and the tower of Zapara, built from 1643 onwards, were not enough to contain the fleets of L'Olonnais or Morgan <sup>24</sup>.

The Zapara Indians, allies first and then rebels, knew the area deeply, and facilitated both the navigation of the Spaniards and the piratical incursions. Their role reveals the complexity of colonial dynamics around the knowledge of the territory <sup>25</sup>. The wealth generated by trade and agricultural production made Maracaibo a strategic node. But a lack of investment in defense and the corruption of royal officials limited the ability to react to attacks. This

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23 Zalazar, I. J. (2020). The bar of Lake Maracaibo. A little of its history. Academy of History of the State of Zulia. p. 3).

24 Luis Alberto Ramírez Méndez, *The Promised Land of the South of Lake Maracaibo. The Holy Hospital of Charity Jesus Nazareno of San Antonio de Gibraltar (XVII–XVIII Centuries)*, volume V (Maracaibo: Ediciones Clío, 2023), 73–75; Alfredo Villalobos, *Corsarios y comercio en el Caribe hispano* (Mérida: Fondo Editorial Andino, 2001), 75.

25 Brother Nectario María. (1959). *History of Maracaibo*. Maracaibo: Ediciones Bellas Artes / Cultural Board of the University of Zulia. p. 464.

structural weakness encouraged an informal economy sustained by smuggling and social resilience<sup>26</sup>.

In short, the seventeenth century was a time of economic consolidation and confrontation with the threats of the Caribbean for Maracaibo. The city remained as an articulating axis between the Andean interior and the Caribbean, articulating a frontier economy<sup>27</sup> that survived thanks to adaptation, regional trade and a culture of resistance deeply rooted in its collective memory<sup>28</sup>.

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26 Luis Alberto Ramírez Méndez, *The Promised Land of the South of Lake Maracaibo. The Holy Hospital of Charity Jesus Nazareno of San Antonio de Gibraltar (XVII–XVIII Centuries)*, volume IV (Maracaibo: Ediciones Clío, 2021), 35–42.

27 A frontier economy is understood as an economic model that arises in peripheral territories or poorly integrated into the center of imperial power, where the absence of effective control by the State, institutional weakness and geographical remoteness favor the emergence of informal circuits, smuggling networks and local adaptation practices. In regions such as Maracaibo during the seventeenth century, this frontier economy was sustained by the interaction between colonial actors, indigenous communities, merchants, and corsairs, generating a hybrid dynamic in which official legality and the practical functionality of the illicit economy coexisted. Far from representing simple disorder, these economic forms reflected strategies of survival and autonomy in contexts of structural abandonment and permanent threat.

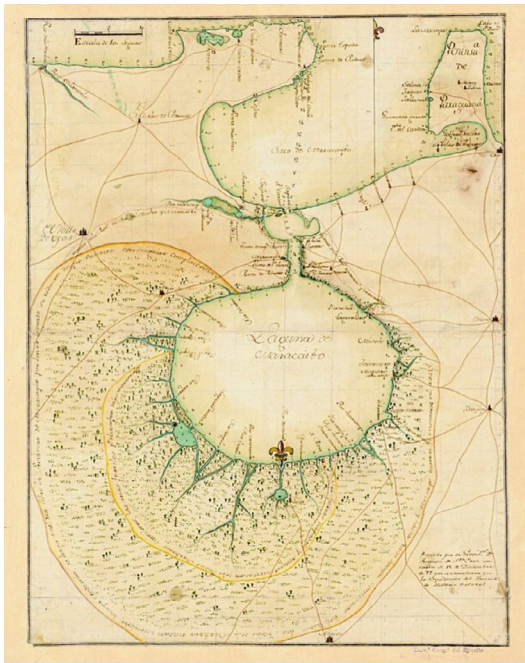
28 Vázquez, B. (2006). *From monarchical sovereign power to republican sovereign power*. Ediciones Clío Foundation. pp. 170–174.

*Part Two:*  
*Cycle of Raids (1614-1678)*



## Chapter 4:

### *Enrique de Gerard and the First Pirate Raid on Maracaibo (1614)*



Archive: Ministry of the Army Madrid. Map Plan of the Lagoon and Bay of Maracaibo. Date: 1777. Dimensions: 41 x 53 cm. Author: Unknown. In *Maps and Plans of MARACAIBO and its region (1499-1820)*. By Brother Nectario María. Published on the occasion of the Sesquicentennial of the Naval Battle of “Captain Chico,” off Maracaibo. July 24, 1823. Madrid 1973.

Enrique de Gerard, also recorded in some sources as Henrik de Gerard, was a Dutch corsair active in the first decades of the seventeenth century and protagonist of the first documented piratical raid against the city of Maracaibo in 1614. His figure represents the beginning of a cycle of maritime violence in western Venezuela that would last until the end of the seventeenth century. Although his biography remains largely shrouded in anonymity, his name appears linked to the context of the Eighty Years' War (1568–1648 <sup>29</sup>), during which the United Provinces of the Netherlands granted pirates permission to weaken Spanish rule in the Americas <sup>30</sup>.

In the above sense, the history of the piratical attacks against Maracaibo cannot be understood without going back to the year 1614, when the Dutch corsair led the first known armed incursion against the city. This episode, although less documented than the subsequent assaults by figures such as William Jackson or El Olonés, marks the starting point

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29 The Eighty Years' War (1568–1648), also known as the Dutch War of Independence, was a protracted conflict between the United Provinces of the North and the Spanish Habsburg monarchy. The conflict combined religious, economic, and political aspects, culminating in the de facto independence of the Netherlands, formally recognized in the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. This war had major repercussions on Atlantic trade, the European balance of power, and the rise of the Netherlands as a maritime power.

30 Cornelis Ch. Goslinga, *The Dutch in the Caribbean and on the Wild Coast, 1580–1680* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1971), 134–135.

of the maritime conflict that would affect western Venezuela for much of the seventeenth century <sup>31</sup>.

It was in this context of inter-imperial tension that Gerard organized his expedition. Probably starting from some clandestine base or from ships in transit through the Antilles, he penetrated the bar of Lake Maracaibo, avoiding the sandy banks that, although they represented a natural obstacle, were not enough to stop his advance. The looting was brief but symbolically devastating: it showed the vulnerability of the town, barely defended by improvised militias and lacking fortifications. Although this attack did not last significantly or involve territorial occupation, it left an indelible mark on colonial memory. It was the first official record of a piratical plunder, and served as an early warning of Maracaibo's strategic value as an entry point to the colonial west. From this episode, the governors and local councils began to discuss the need to establish coastal defenses <sup>32</sup>.

One of the most discussed projects was the fortification of the entrance to the lake, an idea that would crystallize decades later with the construction of the Castle of San Carlos, in the Bourbon era.

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31 Luis Britto García, *Demons of the Sea: Pirates and Corsairs in Venezuela (1528–1725)* (Caracas: Ediciones Vadell, 2000).

32 Elías Cardoza Sáez, "Fortification and Defense of the Maracaibo Bar in the Province of Mérida," *Tiempo y Espacio* 64 (2015): 114–129.

The vulnerability of the city was thus exposed not only to eventual attacks, but also to a structural logic of privateering as a tool of war <sup>33</sup>. In this sense, Enrique de Gerard can be considered, in retrospect, the precursor of a long chain of Caribbean assaults. His name is absent from many Spanish colonial records, perhaps because of the surprising nature of the attack and because of the fragmentary nature of the archives. However, its irruption opened a stage that would culminate in much more sustained episodes of violence <sup>34</sup>.

Finally, we will say that, although Enrique de Gerard's attack on Maracaibo in 1614 is recognized by historiography as the first documented piratical incursion in the region, a direct narrative description of the event is not preserved in Spanish or Dutch primary sources known to date. The available references derive from reconstructions made by contemporary historians, who identify this action as a turning point in the defensive policy of the colonial West.

The absence of detailed chronicles – such as those that do exist for the attacks of L'Olonnais or Morgan

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33 Carmen Vidales, "Corsairs and Pirates of the French Revolution in the Waters of Hispano-American Emancipation," *Caravelle*, no. 54 (1990): 247–262.

34 Linda M. Rupert, *Creolization and Contraband: Curaçao in the Early Modern Atlantic World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

– suggests that the assault was brief, without territorial occupation, and possibly ignored at the time by the viceregal bureaucracy. Despite this, its strategic impact was significant, motivating early discussions on the need to fortify the Lake Maracaibo bar and reinforce coastal surveillance.



*Chapter 5:*  
*William Jackson and the First Wave*  
*of Terror: The 1642 Assault on*  
*Maracaibo and Gibraltar*



**William Jackson, buccaneer.**

Throughout the seventeenth century, the Caribbean became a scene of dispute between European powers, especially between Spain, England, France and the Netherlands. The Spanish colonies, rich in resources, but poorly defended, became constant targets of piratical raids. In this context, figures such as William Jackson, an English privateer in the service of the British Crown, initiated a series of attacks that marked the beginning of an era of terror in the region.

One of the first high-impact attacks on Maracaibo and San Antonio de Gibraltar took place in 1642, when Jackson led an expedition that highlighted the vulnerability of these cities and opened the way for more violent raids to come, such as that of François L'Olonnais in 1665 <sup>35</sup>.

Jackson set sail from Jamaica, then a strategic base for English privateers. His fleet, made up of several ships and a large contingent of men, aimed to attack Spanish coastal cities in search of booty. When he arrived in Maracaibo, he found an almost unguarded city. Faced with the news of the arrival of the corsair, many inhabitants fled inland, leaving the square practically undefended. Encountering no significant resistance, Jackson landed and occupied the city with ease, establishing absolute control and

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35 Villalobos, Alfredo. Corsairs and trade in the Hispanic Caribbean. Mérida: Fondo Editorial Andino, 2001, pp. 70–95.

preparing the ground for looting<sup>36</sup>.

Once in control, the English privateers carried out a methodical looting that included homes, churches and warehouses. Jackson and his crew seized gold, silver, and other wealth, while residents who failed to flee were subjected to interrogations and threats. Unlike subsequent attacks, their strategy was not based on extreme violence, but on intimidation and negotiation. To secure control of the area and increase his profits, Jackson demanded a ransom of goods and money from the local authorities, obtaining considerable sums without destroying the city. This approach contrasted with the methods of pirates such as L'Olonnais, who decades later would apply much greater cruelty<sup>37</sup>.

After the sack of Maracaibo, Jackson went to San Antonio de Gibraltar, a key town due to its strategic location and commercial activity. There he replicated his tactics: he took the city without encountering effective resistance, frightened the population and demanded a ransom in exchange for security. With the booty secured, he withdrew without razing the settlements, making it clear that Maracaibo was an easy target, which encouraged later, more brutal at-

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36 Cardoza Sáez, Pedro. *Chronicles of the colonial west*. Mérida: Editorial de los Andes, 2015, pp. 114–129.

37 Ramírez Méndez, Luis Alberto. *The promised land*. Volume II. Caracas: Ediciones El Perro y la Rana, 2023, pp. 78–80.

tacks. The lack of response from the Spanish Crown kept the region exposed to piracy, generating a cycle of incursions that would repeat itself throughout the century<sup>38</sup>.

The attack of 1642 marked a before and after for Maracaibo. Although it was not as bloodthirsty as those to come, it evidenced the fragility of Spanish rule. The population was terrorized, many families thought of leaving the city, and commercial and productive activity was seriously weakened<sup>39</sup>. The ease with which Jackson executed his offensive revealed the ineffectiveness of the Spanish defenses, encouraging other privateers to turn their attention to the region.

Although Jackson did not apply bloodthirsty methods, his attack opened the way to a wave of raids that would devastate Maracaibo in later years. In 1665, the Frenchman François L'Olonnais would execute a brutal assault, characterized by torture, murder, and destruction. Jackson's precedent was an early warning ignored by Spanish authorities. The sack of 1642 was the beginning of a series of attacks that made Maracaibo a recurring target for pirates for the rest of the 17th century<sup>40</sup>.

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38 Ministry of People's Power for Culture. *Promised Land*. Volume 2. Caracas: 2024, p. 78.

39 Britto García, Elías. *Maracaibo, city of relationships*. Caracas: Monte Ávila Editores, 2000, pp. 114–129.

40 Exquemelin, Alexandre Olivier. *Pirates of America*. 1678, pp. 210–213.

According to Ramírez Méndez: “Jackson’s incursion was an intelligent and systematic operation, focused on economic blackmail and not on extermination, but whose effect was to demoralize the population and expose its vulnerability.”<sup>41</sup> Although Alexandre Olivier Exquemelin does not offer details about this expedition in his work *Pirates of America*, the silence regarding Jackson could be interpreted as an indication of less or less spectacular violence compared to other pirates of his time<sup>42</sup>.

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41 Ramírez Méndez, Luis Alberto. The promised land. Volume II. Caracas: Ediciones El Perro y la Rana, 2023, pp. 78–80.

42 Exquemelin, Alexandre Olivier. *Pirates of America*. 1678, pp. 210–213.



Chapter 6:  
*The Terror of L'Olonnais and  
Michael the Basque: The Devastation  
of 1665 in Maracaibo and  
Gibraltar*



**François l'Olonnais, 1666. Pirata.**

During the seventeenth century, the Caribbean became a hotbed of piratical activity due to the accumulated wealth and weak defenses of the Spanish colonies. In this scenario, François L'Olonnais, a French pirate known for his legendary brutality, stood out with sinister notoriety. Accompanied by Michael the Basque and a contingent of filibusters recruited on the island of La Tortuga, L'Olonnais capitalized on imperial tensions and the structural weakness of the Spanish defensive apparatus in the Caribbean region <sup>43</sup>.

In 1665, he led one of the most destructive raids against Maracaibo and San Antonio de Gibraltar. His fleet, composed of two urcas and six sloops, attacked the fortress of Lake Maracaibo and took it after several hours of combat, allowing the pirates to enter. The Marabinos, panicked, fled to Gibraltar, abandoning the city to its fate. According to Exquemelin, "L'Olonnais, coming from the island of La Tortuga, made his entry into the bar and city of Maracaibo, with a fleet composed of two large, well-armed urcas and six sloops, attacked the fortress of the bar fighting for three hours, managing to subdue the defenders who capitulated to the artillery of the corsairs". <sup>44</sup>

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43 Luis Alberto Ramírez Méndez. *Promised Land*, volume 2. Maracaibo: Ediciones Centro Histórico, 2020, 60–61.

44 Alexandre-Olivier Exquemelin. *The Buccaneers of America*. Translated by Alonso de Buena-Maison. Amsterdam: John Ten Hoorn,

The assault on Maracaibo was relentless. The city, unguarded, was subjected to a methodical sack. Corsairs went through every house, warehouse, and church. Exquemelin narrates how the Marabinos, convinced that “*the pirates would come with 2000 fighters*”, fled with what they could, leaving the city vulnerable. L’Olonnais not only looted, but persecuted refugees and employed all kinds of torture to obtain information about hidden treasures<sup>45</sup>.

The tortures were brutal. Exquemelin documents: “The bandit took the time necessary to track down all the buried jewels... This attack was bloodthirsty and monstrous, because it was accompanied by a brutal persecution to which the population was subjected to reveal where the treasures were buried.” The descriptions of the treatment of prisoners are of unusual cruelty: “... some were hung by the companions, leaving them in that way until they fell to the ground, tearing the verecund parts of themselves <sup>46</sup>.”

Within the city, L’Olonnais imposed a regime of systematic torture to force residents to confess the whereabouts of their property. “Some prisoners were cut to pieces little by little, others were tied with twisted ropes until their eyes came out of their sockets, and others were hung by the limbs until they were dis-

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1681, chap. VIII.

45 Ibid., cap. VIII.

46 Ibid., cap. VIII.

membered. One of his cruelest practices was to take out the hearts of his victims and bite them in front of others, to terrorize those who still resisted.”<sup>47</sup>

This violence was not arbitrary. According to historian Luis Alberto Ramírez Méndez, it was a form of structural domination. L’Olonnais “did not seek only gold, but to break the collective spirit of the city”, establishing a pattern of punishment that affected everyone: merchants, clergymen, women, children. Churches were desecrated, their chalices stolen, and altars turned into torture chambers<sup>48</sup>.

Once Maracaibo was sacked, the flotilla headed for Gibraltar, where the massacre continued. The pattern of intimidation and destruction was repeated: the inhabitants were gathered in the church under threat of fire, public torture was carried out and houses were set on fire. In the words of Ramírez Méndez, “Gibraltar was the perfect example of the cycle of devastation established by the filibusters. To the material loss was added the destruction of all forms of social cohesion.”<sup>49</sup>

The governor of Gibraltar, Gabriel Guerrero Sandoval, tried to resist with four hundred men, including nobles and commoners from Mérida. But the defense was defeated. L’Olonnais captured slaves

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47 Ibid., cap. VIII.

48 Ramírez Méndez, *Tierra Prometida*, vol. 2, pp. 60–61:

49 Ramírez Méndez, *Tierra Prometida*, vol. 2, 65.

and promised them freedom in exchange for information. “The buccaneer, knowing this situation, imprisoned the slaves and with promises of freedom, convinced them to take them to where the Emeritenses were hiding.”

Gibraltar fell after a fierce siege. For more than two weeks, the city was the scene of death, looting and despair. The aftermath was devastating: urban destruction, collective trauma, and widespread impoverishment. The impact was so profound that it forced the Spanish Crown to rethink its defensive strategy in the Caribbean, although the measures adopted proved insufficient.

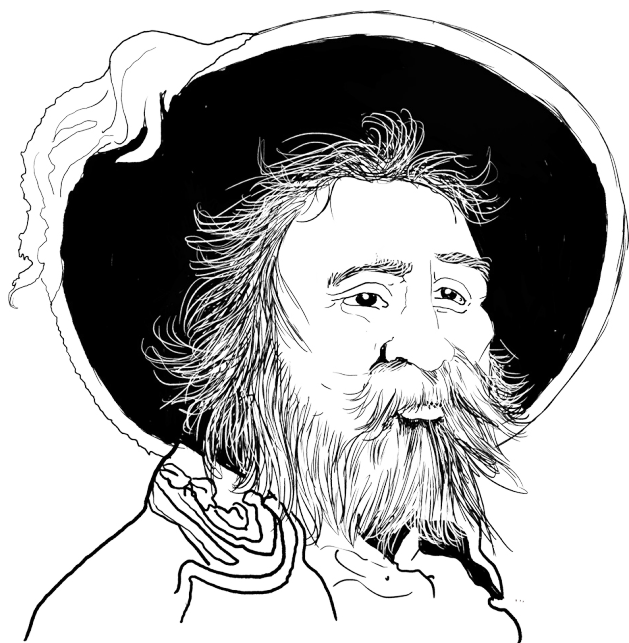
The attack by L’Olonnais and Michael the Basque in 1665 marked a breaking point. Not only did it consolidate the former’s fame as one of the most feared pirates of the seventeenth century, but it also left an open wound in Maracaibo and Gibraltar. Destruction and terror reconfigured the regional imaginary and its memory lasted for generations <sup>50</sup>.

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50     Ramírez Méndez, *Tierra Prometida*, vol. 2, 66.



*Chapter 7:*  
*1667 - The Return of Michael the*  
*Basque*



**Michael the Basque**

Two years after the devastating campaign of 1665, Michael the Basque returned to the Caribbean driven by the persistent weakness of the colonial defenses and rumors of riches not found in his previous raid. Taking advantage of social unrest and discontent with the Crown, he managed to assemble a new flotilla with adventurers, renegades and former comrades-in-arms. The new assault was not only built on the recent memory of terror, but also sought to reactivate fear as a strategy of domination. The name of Michael the Basque, already associated with the barbarity of the previous attack, was enough to sow panic among the coastal inhabitants <sup>51</sup>.

The colonial authorities, although warned, failed to organize an effective defense. Some positions around Lake Maracaibo, such as the barra and the coastal forts, were reinforced, but the lack of coordination between the garrisons, the lack of artillery and the small number of regular soldiers left vast areas undefended. Michael the Basque avoided the fortified points and focused his strategy on quick and surprise attacks, exploiting the fissures of the colonial defensive system. As Cardoza Sáez points out, he employed psychological warfare tactics, sending emissaries with prior threats to sow panic even before his arrival. He used rumors, the reputation built

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51 Luis Alberto Ramírez Méndez, *Tierra Prometida*, tomo 2 (Maracaibo: Ediciones Centro Histórico, 2020), 67–69

in the previous assault and symbolic violence to dis-mantle the resistance without the need for an open confrontation <sup>52</sup>.

The news of his return generated a dual reaction in the population. While many families chose to flee inland, others began to organize rudimentary forms of resistance. For the first time, after the tragedy of 1665, spontaneous local militias emerged. Although poorly armed, these groups represented an important symbolic change: the will to defend the territory began to take root among the settlers, marking a break with the passive attitude of flight. These militias were made up of artisans, peasants and clerics determined to keep their temples and goods safe. Some chroniclers mention that women and children also actively participated in warning work, hiding valuable objects and helping the combatants <sup>53</sup>.

The impact of this second raid was not as devastating in material terms as the previous one, but its psychological effect was profound. It reignited trauma, exposed the flaws of defensive reforms, and showed the urgency of local autonomous organization. Marabinos and Gibraltarians, aware of their helplessness, began to develop surveillance systems,

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52    Ramírez Méndez, Luis Alberto. *Promised Land*. Volume 2. Maracaibo: Ediciones Centro Histórico, 2020, 68.

53    Ramírez Méndez, Luis Alberto. *Promised Land*. Volume 2. Maracaibo: Ediciones Centro Histórico, 2020, 69.

safe havens and collective warning strategies. In the words of Ramírez Méndez, this episode tested “the adaptive capacity of the communities under siege”, forcing them to move from resignation to action. In many houses hiding places were built for women and children, while priests hid chalices and liturgical documents under altars. Even the rural roads were altered to mislead the invaders <sup>54</sup>.

The siege of 1667 cemented the image of Michael the Basque as a tenacious and calculating corsair leader. Their ability to mobilize men and exploit colonial weaknesses showed that the Caribbean remained a theatre of irregular warfare. Although the Spanish authorities responded with new defense plans, such as the strengthening of the garrison in Gibraltar and the articulation with the Royal Court of Bogotá, the effectiveness of these measures was uneven. However, the real change happened at the societal level: communities began to take a more active role in protecting their spaces. It was no longer just a matter of surviving, but of resisting with dignity. This transition from passivity to popular courage laid the foundations for a collective memory in the region, which would later inspire movements for local autonomy and rejection of centralist neglect <sup>55</sup>.

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54    Ramírez Méndez, Luis Alberto. *Promised Land*. Volume 2. Maracaibo: Ediciones Centro Histórico, 2020, 69.

55    Ramírez Méndez, Luis Alberto. *Promised Land*. Volume 2. Maracaibo: Ediciones Centro Histórico, 2020, 70.

*Chapter 8:*  
*Henry Morgan: The Scourge of*  
*Maracaibo and Gibraltar (1669)*



**Henry Morgan**

Henry Morgan (c. 1635–1688), a Welsh privateer in the service of the English Crown, stands as one of the most emblematic figures of the rise of piracy in the Caribbean. His rise was not the result of chance, but the result of a combination of audacity, political pragmatism and military prowess. From his base in Jamaica, Morgan forged alliances with British colonial authorities, obtaining letters of marque that gave him legal legitimacy to attack Spanish positions. However, his methods were indistinguishable from those of any filibuster. His campaign combined economic and geopolitical objectives, weakening Spain through a covert war of plunder and terror <sup>56</sup>.

The 1669 raid against Maracaibo and San Antonio de Gibraltar is one of the most studied by Caribbean historiography. Morgan organized an expedition composed of about ten ships and more than 380 men, departing from Port Royal with military precision. Upon reaching the bar of Lake Maracaibo, his men captured the fortress of San Carlos, weakened by the previous attacks of L'Olonnais. With the garrison disorganized, the capture of Maracaibo and then Gibraltar was carried out without major resistance. Surprise and deception were key to its success <sup>57</sup>.

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56 Exquemelin, A. O. *From Americaensche Zee-Roovers (The Pirates of America)*. Amsterdam: Jan ten Hoorn, 1678, pp. 203–206.

57 2.Villalobos, A. *Corsarios and trade in the Hispanic Caribbean*. Mérida: Fondo Editorial Andino, 2001, p. 92; Ramírez Méndez, L.

Once in control of Maracaibo, Morgan employed a recurring tactic in his campaigns: the so-called *bailout by capitulation*. This consisted of demanding payment in money, slaves, merchandise and sacred objects from the authorities and inhabitants in exchange for not completely destroying the city or executing its inhabitants. In this sense, the most brutal event of that occupation was the assassination of the governor of the city, executed with extreme cruelty. The decapitation and dismemberment of the official, whose remains were publicly exhibited, constituted a symbolic warning of the absolute domination that the invaders intended to impose. Such an episode, more than a punitive action, represented an open break with the viceregal order, forcibly establishing a logic of occupation based on terror, humiliation and extortion negotiation. This is how Luis Alberto Ramirez describes it to us:

“The pirates caught him and cut off his head, then dismembered him and left his body exposed in the main square of Maracaibo. With this brutal act, they made it clear that they would not respect any authority, and that their power over the city was absolute.”<sup>58</sup>

These actions constituted a form of structured extortion, combining violence, negotiation and uns-

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A. The Promised Land..., Cabimas: Ediciones Clío, 2023, pp. 108–111.

58 Luis Alberto Ramírez Méndez, *Tierra prometida*. Volume II (Maracaibo: Ediciones Clío, 2023), 271.

crupulous commercial logic. In this case, the sum was high, and given the proximity of the Spanish navy led by Alonso del Campo, Morgan not only redoubled the pressure on the Marabinos, but also executed a remarkable tactical maneuver: he transformed one of his vessels into a *brulote*, that is, a trap ship loaded with gunpowder, and directed it against the main ship of the enemy fleet. The explosion disorganized the Spanish defense and allowed Morgan to escape Lake Maracaibo with his flotilla and booty intact <sup>59</sup>.

This display of brutality and military cunning reveals the meticulously planned nature of the raid. Far from being an impulsive looting, Morgan's operation in Maracaibo was a demonstration of strategic and psychological dominance. The governor's public execution served as the foundational act of a momentary new order: one where legitimate authority was replaced by the power of arms and fear. Thus, violence was not only a means of submission, but a political language through which the corsairs imposed their will and negotiated from a position of strength. Ultimately, this dual tactic—terror and rescue—sealed a tragic page in the city's colonial history <sup>60</sup>.

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59 Exquemelin, A. O., op. cit., pp. 212–215; Promised Land, Clio Editions Archive, Volume 1, 2024, p. 142.

60 Luis Alberto Ramírez Méndez, *Tierra prometida. Volume II* (Maracaibo: Ediciones Clío, 2023), 271.

But not everything was resolved with pacts or tactical audacity. To ensure compliance with the payment and to obtain information about hidden fortunes, Morgan and his men resorted to systematic torture. The direct testimony of Alexandre-Olivier Exquemelin, who accompanied the expedition as a surgeon, starkly illustrates these methods. One of the most extreme cases occurred during the sack of the city, when a merchant was subjected to excruciating torments for refusing to confess where he kept his money <sup>61</sup>:

*“Morgan’s men did not believe him, and hoisted him up by the arms until his shoulders were dislocated. Even so, he did not confess, so they tied long ropes around his big thumbs toes, spreading him in a cross on four stakes. Four of them began to beat the ropes with sticks, causing his body to shake, stretching his tendons. Not yet satisfied, they placed a stone weighing at least a hundred kilos on his belly and lit a fire of palm leaves underneath, burning his face and setting fire to his hair. Despite such torments, he did not confess to having money.”*<sup>62</sup>

On the other hand, during the capture of Gibraltar – after the sack of Maracaibo – Morgan not only used physical violence as a method of individual

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61 Alexandre-Olivier Exquemelin, *Piratas de América*, translation by José María Vergés (Barcelona: Ediciones Iberia, 1945), 219.

62 Alexandre-Olivier Exquemelin, *The Buccaneers of America*, translation by Alonso de Buena-Maison, Amsterdam: Juan Ten Hoorn, 1681, Chapter VII.

pressure, but also developed a systematic strategy of collective torture. He gathered the inhabitants, including women, children, and clergy, and locked them in the village church or in open spaces. There, through the use of threats, mock executions, and physical punishments, he tried to obtain information about hidden treasures. The threat of burning down the church with everyone inside was one of the resources most feared by the residents. Some witnesses mentioned that partial hangings were practiced, where prisoners were suspended by the neck for short periods, then dropped to the ground and revived, repeating the operation as a form of psychological torture. This is how Exquemelin points out in his memoirs<sup>63</sup>.

*“Morgan had more than 500 people locked up in the church in Gibraltar, threatening to set it on fire if they did not hand over all the gold and silver they had hidden. Some were briefly hung by the neck and released before dying, and then tortured again, demanding the disclosure of hiding places or chests.”*<sup>64</sup>

Exquemelin makes it clear that torture was not an isolated event, but a systematic and planned method to extort the inhabitants. It was a policy of

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63 Alexandre-Olivier Exquemelin, *Pirates of America*, translation by José María Vergés (Barcelona: Ediciones Iberia, 1945), 227.

64 Alexandre-Olivier Exquemelin, *The Buccaneers of America*, trans. Alonso de Buena-Maison (Amsterdam: Juan Ten Hoorn, 1681), chap. VII.

looting based on physical suffering: whipping, limb suspensions, partial mutilations and burns that were carried out as common practices. Taken together, the accounts of Alexandre-Olivier Exquemelin reveal that the violence exercised by Henry Morgan's men during the raid of 1669 was not limited to the looting of property, but responded to a calculated strategy of physical, symbolic and psychological terror<sup>65</sup>.

As we have previously pointed out, the torture of priests, the desecration of sacred spaces and the use of mock executions were deliberate mechanisms to break the collective will, erode all forms of resistance and guarantee compliance with the demands imposed. Instead of isolated individual punishments, these practices functioned as public warnings addressed to the entire population, generating a climate of submission and fear that allowed the pirates to exert absolute control over the occupied city. Far from being acts of spontaneous barbarism, these actions responded to a logic of domination that turned the body and faith of the inhabitants into battlefields of corsair power<sup>66</sup>.

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65 Exquemelin, Alexandre Olivier. *Pirates of America*. Amsterdam: Jan ten Hoorn, 1678.

66 Ramírez Méndez, Luis Alberto. 2023. The promised land of the South of Lake Maracaibo. *The Holy Hospital of Charity Jesus Nazareno of San Antonio de Gibraltar (XVII–XVIII Centuries)*, Volume V. Maracaibo: Ediciones Clío.

In view of the above, we will say that the attack of 1669 left profound material and psychological consequences. Churches, houses, warehouses were looted, and regional trade was paralyzed. The population, already battered by previous attacks, lost all faith in the protection of the Crown. The episode accelerated debates on the need to strengthen the defenses of the Hispanic Caribbean, provoking military reforms, construction of new fortresses and reinforcement of the fleet system <sup>67</sup>.

Internationally, the expedition reignited discussion about the role of privateers in English diplomacy. Although he acted under letters of marque, the damage caused by Morgan strained relations with Spain. However, far from being punished, he was rewarded: he returned as a hero to Jamaica, was knighted by Charles II and became lieutenant governor. His trajectory demonstrates how piracy functioned as an informal extension of English imperial policy <sup>68</sup>.

Morgan's tactical sophistication was remarkable. Knowing the tides and the geography of the lake

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67 Cardoza Sáez, E. *Military History of the Caribbean in the Seventeenth Century*. Madrid: Editorial Naval, 2015, pp. 120–122; Britto García, L. *Demons of the Sea*. Caracas: Ediciones Vadell, 2000, p. 128.

68 Franco, J. L. *The colonial government of Cuba...* Ediciones Clío, 2022, pp. 36–38; Vázquez, B. *Del poder soberano...*, Ediciones Clío, 2006, p. 173.

bar, he used light boats and took the key pillboxes, showing nautical expertise and intelligence obtained, possibly, from other corsairs or local informants. Their action combined naval and land warfare in a synchronized manner, turning their raid into a lesson in amphibious warfare <sup>69</sup>.

In the collective memory of Maracaibo, Morgan's name was engraved as the most feared face of piracy in the seventeenth century. Although its passage brought destruction, it also acted as a catalyst for change: the Castle of San Carlos was reinforced, local militias were organized and new mechanisms of surveillance and defense were established. The raid of 1669 not only closed a cycle of looting, but transformed the forms of perception, defense, and organization of the colonial Caribbean <sup>70</sup>.

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69    Zalazar, I. J. The bar of Lake Maracaibo. Academy of History of Zulia, 2020, p. 5; Ramírez Méndez, L. A. Economic History of Venezuela..., Volume II, UCV, 2021, pp. 87–89.

70    Besson, J. History of the State of Zulia, Volume IV. Belloso Rosell, 1943, p. 68; Ramírez Méndez, L. A., op. cit., Volume III, pp. 143–145.



*Chapter 9:*  
*Michel de Grammont and the Last*  
*Great Assault (1678)*



**Michel de Grammont**

Michel de Grammont, also known as Francisco Grammont in Spanish-American sources, was a key figure in late French piracy in the Caribbean. Their raid in 1678 marked the culminating and final point of the cycle of great corsair attacks against the towns around the Maracaibo Lagoon. Endowed with a letter of marque issued by the French authorities of La Tortuga, Grammont operated with legal and logistical support. In the context of the tensions between France and Spain during the second half of the seventeenth century, their mission combined military and economic objectives: to destabilise Spanish rule in the Caribbean and to obtain considerable wealth through systematic plunder. His action was a clear expression of the use of piracy as a geopolitical weapon by the European powers <sup>71</sup>.

Grammont's expedition was one of the best organized of its time. After gathering a flotilla of more than a dozen light boats and about 700 men in La Tortuga, he headed for the bar of Lake Maracaibo. With knowledge inherited from corsairs such as Morgan and L'Olonnais, he captured the fort of Zapara and then the fortress of San Carlos without difficulty. The city of Maracaibo, still weakened by previous raids, was taken almost without resistance. From there, the corsairs advanced towards Trujillo,

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71 Luis Alberto Ramírez Méndez, *Tierra Prometida*, tomo 2 (Maracaibo: Ediciones Centro Histórico, 2020), 71.

an Andean city that until then had escaped the piratical scourge, demonstrating the logistical scope of the operation <sup>72</sup>.

The attack was characterized by systematic brutality. In Maracaibo, houses were set on fire, temples were looted, graves were desecrated and acts of extreme violence were carried out. The capture of Trujillo was even bolder, involving a journey through mountainous terrain to a city without a coastal defense. The speed and intensity of the looting showed a well-calculated strategy. Despite the reinforcements ordered following Morgan's attacks, the colonial authorities were overwhelmed by privateering mobility and tactics <sup>73</sup>.

The economic and social consequences were devastating. Maracaibo, sacked for the third time in less than twenty years, was once again left in ruins. Its trade was paralyzed, its inhabitants fled to rural areas, and its recovery was limited. In Trujillo, the looting of churches and haciendas produced a profound economic rupture. Many families left the region, generating internal displacements that reconfigured the human landscape of western Venezuela <sup>74</sup>.

The attack also represented a turning point in imperial policy. Alarmed, the Crown ordered the consolidation of permanent defensive systems: for-

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72    Ramírez Méndez, *Tierra Prometida*, tomo 2, 72.

73    Ramírez Méndez, *Tierra Prometida*, vol. 2, 72–73.

74    Ramírez Méndez, *Tierra Prometida*, vol. 2, 74.

tifications, naval surveillance in the Gulf of Venezuela and administrative reorganization. However, lack of resources, local corruption and distance from the central power hindered the effective implementation of these measures <sup>75</sup>.

In global perspective, the Grammont expedition reflects the projection of European rivalries on America. Although France and Spain were not at formal war, the attack of 1678 coincided with the end of the Franco-Dutch War, evidencing the use of privateers as indirect agents of the imperial conflict. This indirect connection between diplomacy and piracy cemented La Tortuga's role as a base of French operations in the Caribbean and reinforced the notion that the Caribbean Sea was an extension of European tensions <sup>76</sup>.

Finally, Grammont's name was engraved as the author of the last great assault on Maracaibo. The nascent city began a period of militarization of the port, restrictions on unauthorized trade and greater coordination with the Royal Court of Bogotá. While piracy did not disappear immediately, the raid of 1678 marked the close of a violent era and the beginning of a new defensive phase in the colonial Caribbean <sup>77</sup>.

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75    Ramírez Méndez, *Tierra Prometida*, vol. 2, 75.

76    Carlos Vidales, *Pirates and Corsairs: From the Caribbean to the Pacific Coasts* (Bogotá: Editorial Ocean Sur, 2012), 109.

77    Ramírez Méndez, *Tierra Prometida*, vol. 2, 75.

## *Conclusions*

The present study has sought much more than to recount a cycle of attacks: it has explored how a community subjected to constant siege was able to reinvent its way of inhabiting the territory, articulate forms of defense beyond the imperial apparatus, and generate a resistant memory that is still expressed in its foundational narratives. The experience of Maracaibo and its surroundings cannot be reduced to the count of ruins or martyrdoms, but must be understood as part of a larger geopolitical logic, in which the colonial margins assumed, with limited autonomy, the challenges of a war imposed from abroad.

The history reconstructed in these pages allows us to notice that Lake Maracaibo was more than just an access road: it became a scene of symbolic and material dispute, where European ambition and local response capacity were measured. Piracy, far from being a marginal or spontaneous phenomenon, constituted a delegated warfare technology that found its main strategic advantage in colonial

fragility. However, to the same extent that the corsairs knew how to take advantage of the weaknesses of the system, the inhabitants of the region learned to reorganize their political life, their affections and their resources according to the threat.

Maracaibo was not only a victim of corsairs, but also the scene of a pedagogy of fear and cunning. Defensive practices, often informal and communal, reveal a process of politicization of daily life in the face of the ineffectiveness of the established powers. This phenomenon, still little explored by historiography, opens up ways to understand how colonial peoples negotiated their survival between formal obedience to the Crown and concrete action in the face of the immediate threat.

It is significant to note that this cycle of violence not only disrupted the present of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but also shaped lasting imaginaries about the sea, the foreigner and the city itself. The maritime border was not seen again as a promise of trade exclusively, but also as a threshold of horror. The construction of a lake identity marked by suspicion, alertness and pride in having survived the unspeakable, was cemented generation after generation, until it became part of the regional ethos.

In short, the history narrated here allows us to reread the colonial past not only as a chronicle of

grievances, but as an opportunity to recognize the agency of peoples. Maracaibo, even in its fragility, projects itself as a historical subject capable of resisting, remembering and resignifying. This is, ultimately, the most profound legacy left by those years of fire, looting and memory: the possibility of narrating oneself from dignity, even when all seemed lost.

This work would not have been possible without the editorial impetus of the Ediciones Clío Foundation, whose commitment to regional history and the dissemination of knowledge has allowed this memory not to be lost. We deeply appreciate their constant support, their cultural vision and their commitment to rescuing the voice of the territories, beyond oblivion and silence. We also extend our recognition to the Academy of History of the State of Zulia and the Office of the Chronicler of the City of Maracaibo, in the person of Dr. Reyber Parra Contreras, for their valuable collaboration and for actively contributing to the preservation of the historical memory of the region..



## *Glossary of Historical and Naval Terms*

**Boucan:** Taino method of smoking meat adopted by French hunters in Hispaniola, origin of the term ‘buccaneer’. (Lane, 1998)

**Brulote:** A ship loaded with explosives used as a naval weapon during surprise attacks. (Cardoza Sáez, 2015)

**Buccaneer:** Cattle hunters transformed into maritime raiders, especially French and English. (Britto García, 2000)

**Corsair:** A subject who acted with a patent to attack enemy ships during war. (Exquemelin, 1678)

**Filibuster:** Pirates without clear legal distinction who acted in the Caribbean for the purpose of plunder. (Britto García, 2000)

**Gulet:** A light two-masted vessel used in Caribbean raids. (Fernández Duro, 1895)

**Indigo:** Vegetable dye extracted from the plant *Indigofera tinctoria*, widely cultivated in colonial America for export. (Moreno, 2003)

**Letter of marque:** Document that conferred legality on the attack of enemy vessels in times of war. (Luis, 2023)

**Pirate:** Maritime plunderer without legal legitimacy, considered a universal enemy. (Exquemelin, 1678)

**Porcelain Cacao:** Creole variety of high-quality cacao grown in the south of Lake Maracaibo. (Ramírez Méndez, 2021)

**Privateering:** Legal practice of maritime warfare through patents granted by European powers. (Luis, 2023)

**Ransom by capitulation:** Extortion tactic practiced by privateers such as Morgan to obtain riches without destroying cities. (Exquemelin, 1678)

**Sloop:** A small, fast boat, commonly used by corsairs for its maneuverability. (Fernández Duro, 1895)

**Smuggling:** Illicit trade that circumvented colonial controls, often tolerated by local authorities. (Lane, 1998)

**Symbolic torture:** Deliberate use of physical pain as a strategy of domination and fear. (Ramírez Méndez, 2021)

**Urca:** A large and slow merchant ship, used by privateers for its carrying capacity. (Cardoza Sáez, 2015)

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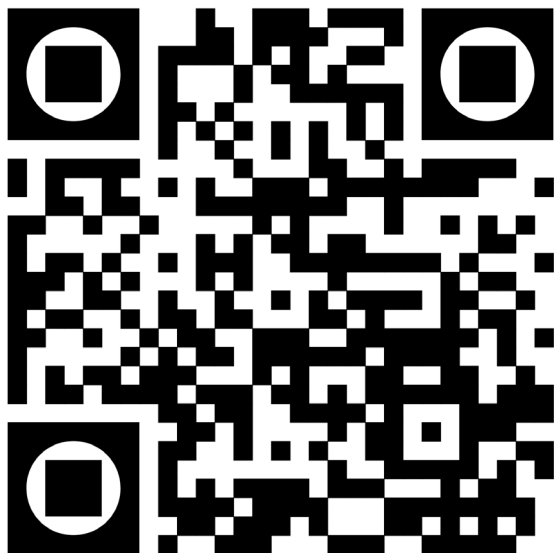




Digital publication by the Clío Editions  
Foundation, Office of the Chronicler of Ma-  
racaibo, and History Academy of Zulia State.

Maracaibo, Venezuela,

July 2025



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*The Besieged Lagoon of Maracaibo: The Scourge of Pirates in the Caribbean (1614-1678)* narrates the cycle of pirate attacks that ravaged Maracaibo between 1614 and 1678, during the peak of Caribbean privateering. Using primary and secondary sources, Jorge Vidovic reconstructs the incursions of privateers such as L'Olonnais, Henry Morgan, and Grammont, analyzing their economic, social, and cultural impact. More than an account of raids, the work explores how maritime violence was part of a geopolitical war between European powers and how the local population developed resistance strategies. A rigorous study revealing how Maracaibo's vulnerability shaped its identity, making it a symbol of survival against the Caribbean siege.

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