THE ORIGIN OF SPANISH DOLLARS ACQUIRED
BY BRITAIN, 1799–1805

J. D. A. THOMPSON

These notes were first compiled as background material for an article published in this Journal in 1953; since then I have more than once had occasion to refer to them for my own purposes, and Mr. W. A. Seaby has acknowledged their use in pinning down the exact or approximate origin of some of the millions of dollars which came into the British Isles during the Napoleonic Wars. Now that his article is published it seems worth printing my notes as an appendix to both papers.

The following entries cover a very limited period, 1799 to 1805. There are several reasons for this; firstly, printed records of dollars and bullion entering this country are scarce before 1799, when the Naval Chronicle (my best source) was first published. Secondly, few if any details of this sort appear after 1805, and thirdly, these six years were undoubtedly the most prolific in the intake of specie and bullion—at a conservative estimate about five million dollars, irrespective of gold and silver bullion, were acquired either by capture at sea, or by purchase. Some were bought by the British Government, some by merchants and private speculators—often dishonest ones—and there was also a large and fairly well-organized trade in dollars smuggled out of Spanish ports, usually by individuals in H.M. ships and in the merchant service.

It would be no easy task to estimate how much specie found its way into the Royal Mint, or to private companies for counterstamping, to Boulton’s mint at Birmingham for recoining into Bank Dollars, or into the melting-pot, but some of the entries in the Naval Chronicle and elsewhere do provide an elementary guide to origin and to the circumstances of acquisition. My chief sources are (i) the Naval Chronicle for 1799–1805, (ii) the memoirs and letters of several distinguished naval officers, among them Lord Cochrane and Sir William Parker.

1. 15 October 1799. Spanish treasure frigates Thetis (34 guns) and Santa Brigida (34 guns), from Vera Cruz (Mexico) to Spain. Taken off Ferrol by H.M. frigates Naiad (38), Ethalion (38), and Triton (32).

The two treasure-ships carried between them about 2,811,526 dollars, besides valuable cargoes of cocoa. They were brought into Plymouth on 21–22 October, and the treasure was deposited in Russell’s warehouses, and on 23 and 25 November it was sent to London in a procession of wagons, guarded by seamen and the Somerset Provisional Cavalry.

Destination: The Bank of England. Prize money: Captains, £40,730. 18s. each; Lieutenants, £5,091. 7s. 3d. each; Warrant Officers (Masters, Gunners, Boatswains, Carpenters), £2,468. 10s. 9d. each; Midshipmen, £791. 17s. 0d. each; Seamen and Marines £182. 4s. 9d. each. Marine officers and surgeons are not mentioned, but would rank with Lieutenants and Masters. The Santa Brigida is said to have been carrying 1,400,000 dollars, and the Thetis 1,411,526 dollars.

Source of treasure: Mexico (and Central America?).

2. 26 November 1799. ‘Arrived the Eurydice of 24 guns, Captain Talbot, from Portsmouth, and the Melampus, 36, Captain Moore, from a cruise. She is to take on board dollars, part of the treasure of the Spanish galleons, to the amount of 40,000 l., said to pay the British and Russian troops in Guernsey and Jersey.’

*Naval Chronicle*, ii, p. 638 (Plymouth Report). Captain Graham Moore, mentioned later, was the brother of General Sir John Moore. The British and Russian troops belonged to the allied army defeated in Holland in 1799.

3. 1799. Letter from Vice-Admiral Sir Hyde Parker, Commander-in-Chief, Leeward Islands Station, to Evan Nepean, Secretary to the Admiralty. A list of captures made by his squadron in 1799. Only one ship contained dollars.

‘Spanish Schooner *Conception*, 121,000 dollars on board, from La Vera Cruz, bound to Havannah; the Master an ensign in the Spanish Navy.’

*Source of treasure*: Mexico.

*Naval Chronicle*, iii (1800), p. 68 (Gazette Letters).

4. 1800. Three Dutch vessels from Java to Ternate, taken by H.M.S. *La Virginie*. Together they contained specie to the amount of 17,943 Spanish milled dollars, exclusive of other valuables.

*Note*: It is doubtful if this treasure ever reached England, as it was probably disposed of by The Admiralty Prize Courts at Calcutta or Bombay.

*Source of treasure*: Uncertain.

*Naval Chronicle*, v, pp. 182 and 248 (East Indies Report).

No captures for 1801–3 are reported. This is mainly due to the Peace of Amiens (1802–3).

5. 1804. *La Caridad*, French privateer, with 25,000 dollars. Taken by H.M.S. *Desirée* on the Jamaica Station.

*Source of treasure*: Uncertain, perhaps Mexico.

*Note*: The name of this ship is Spanish, but she may have been under French colours when taken.

6. 31 May 1804. ‘A large quantity of dollars were landed yesterday from the *Aeolus* Frigate, Capt. Lord A. Fitzroy, from Jamaica, and forwarded to London.’

*Source of treasure*: These dollars were probably an official purchase by the British Government from the Spanish authorities at Vera Cruz in Mexico. They were originally shipped to England in the French prize *Duquesne*, from Port Royal in Jamaica; the *Duquesne* went ashore and had to return to port so the *Aeolus* (in charge of a West India convoy) brought the treasure home.


7. June–July 1804. ‘Came in this afternoon [26 June] the Felix armed Schooner, 14 guns, Lieutenant Bourne, with three valuable Chasses Marees, her prizes, having on board several chests of silver, about 160,000 dollars, captured close in with the Franch coast, bound from Corunna to France, supposed to be part of the French subsidy from the Court of Madrid.’ [1 July] ‘Yesterday morning, the Chests of dollars taken in the Chasses Marees off the coast of France by the Felix schooner, Lieutenant Bourne, were landed by the Agent, put into Russell’s waggon, under escort, to be forwarded to the Bank of England as bullion.’

‘The dollars were secreted under a quantity of Indian corn in each Chasse-Maree, with which they were laden in bulk.’

*Source of treasure*: Spain (and Spanish-America?). Probably a mixture of Metropolitan mints—e.g. Seville and Madrid—and those of Central and South America.

*Naval Chronicle*, xii (1804), pp. 162 and 251–2.

*Notes*: (a) *Chasse-Maree*: A type of French lugger used mainly in fishing, smuggling, and privateering, but also, as the term implies, for coastguard duties. (b) The practice of hiding money under the normal cargo was a very old one, dating from the sixteenth century, and from the great days of the buccaneers in the Pacific and Caribbean.

Sources of bullion and specie: La Plata and Montevideo (S. America).

The following details are from Gazette Letters printed in the *Naval Chronicle*, xii (1804), pp. 322–4 and 499–500 (*Plymouth Report*) and xiii (1805), *Appendix* (diplomatic correspondence with Spain over this incident, resulting in a declaration of war by Spain in 1804). See also the accounts of this action by James, iii, p. 280, and Laird Clowes, v, pp. 350–2.

(1) *Letter from Captain Moore to Admiral Cornwallis*

*Indefatigable, Plymouth Sound*

October 19, 1804.

Sir,

I have to inform you of the arrival at this port of his Majesty’s Ship under my command, with the Amphion, which I thought proper to order to England for the security of the two Spanish Frigates, La Medee and La Clara, which we have brought with us. We have seen nothing of the Medusa and Lively, with the Spanish Frigate La Fama, since the evening of the action, when they parted from us I enclose a copy of the account delivered to me by the Spanish Major of the Squadron, of the treasure and cargo on board the four ships.

I have the honour to be, &c

(Signed) GRAHAM MOORE

The Hon. Admiral Cornwallis,

Etc., etc., etc.

‘A General Statement of the Goods and Effects brought by the Frigates of this Division, Commanded by Don Joseph de Bustamente y Guerra, Chief of the Squadron of the Royal Navy.

On Account of the King

*Medee*—35 sacks of Vidona wool, 20 chests and sacks of Cascarilla, 1627 bars of tin, 203 pigs of copper, and 521,940 dollars in silver.

*Fama*—300 bars of tin, 28 planks of wood, and 30,000 dollars in silver.

*Mercedes*—20 sacks of Vidona wool, 20 chests and sacks of Cascarilla, 1139 bars of tin, 961 pigs of copper, and 221,000 dollars in silver.

*Clara*—20 sacks of Vidona wool, 20 chests and sacks of Cascarilla, 1666 bars of tin, 571 pigs of copper, and 234,694 dollars in silver.

Total—75 sacks of Vidona wool, 60 chests and sacks of Cascarilla, 4732 bars of tin, 1735 pigs of copper, 28 planks of wood, and 1,307,634 dollars in silver.

On Account of the Merchants

*Medee*—32 chests of ratinia, 952,619 dollars in silver, 279,502 gold reduced into dollars, and 24,600 ingots of gold reduced into dollars.

*Fama*—316,597 dollars in silver, 217,756 gold, reduced into dollars, and 25,411 ingots of gold reduced into dollars.

*Mercedes*—590,000 dollars in silver.

*Clara*—622,400 gold, reduced into dollars.

Total—32 chests of ratinia, 1,859,216 dollars in silver, 1,119,658 gold, reduced into dollars, and 150,011 ingots of gold, reduced into dollars.

On Account of the Marine Company

*Medee*—8,995 seal skins.

*Fama*—14,930 seal skins.

*Clara*—10 pipes of seal oil.

Total 26,926 seal skins, and 10 pipes of seal oil.’
(2) **Note**: Everything in the *Mercedes* must be deducted from these totals, as she was blown up during the action. I take it that the gold and gold ingots ‘reduced into dollars’ means gold dust and ingots ‘worth so many dollars’. In actual currency dollars the total capture appears to have been

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>521,940</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>234,694</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>786,634</strong></td>
<td><strong>on the King’s account</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>925,619</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>316,597</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1,242,216</strong></td>
<td><strong>on the Merchant’s account</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Grand total** 2,028,216

(3) ‘All the public and private treasure, with the plate belonging to individuals, in the Spanish Ships, is ordered to be landed under the care of the Custom-house here, and forwarded to the Bank of England, under escort of the 4th Dragoon Guards; the merchandise on board them is to be placed in warehouses’ (Plymouth Report).

9. 1804. ‘A fine Spanish Brig, el Guixolenza, from the Havannah, laden with cochineal, coffee, and 10,000 l. in dollars, detained by the Maidstone Frigate, is arrived at Plymouth.’

*Source of treasure*: Probably Mexico. The exact number of dollars is not given, but should be 40,000. *Naval Chronicle*, xii (1804), p. 502 (Plymouth Report)

10. 20 October 1804. ‘The Ship Spy, Captain Clark, from the South Seas, arrived here on Sunday last, laden with a large quantity of gold and silver, belonging to Mr. Hurry of Gosport, being the successful produce of a cargo of British Manufactures with which she traded with the inhabitants of South America. The bullion estimated at 100,000 l., and contained in upwards of 100 large casks, was deposited in the Gosport Bank, from whence it was conveyed on Tuesday morning, in three wagons, to the Bank of England, under a strong guard.’

‘The arrival of so much specie at such a time of want is a fortunate accession; and we hope it will assist the circulation of the new dollars, of which part of the cargo, to the amount of 47,000 l. consists.’

*Source of bullion and specie*: South America.


11. 29 December 1804. ‘This afternoon were landed from the Malta of 84 guns, Captain Buller, lately arrived from off Ferrol, several barrels, containing nearly 60,000 dollars in silver, consigned from merchants in Spain to their correspondents in London. They were deposited in Russel’s waggon warehouses, previous to their being sent to London under a proper escort.’

*Sources of treasure*: Ferrol in N.W. Spain (Spanish and S. American mints?).

Sixty thousand dollars was the *official* amount brought to Plymouth in the *Malta*, but this takes no account of private (and illegal) trade by her officers and crew (see my paper of 1953 for an account of silver smuggling about this time).

The *Malta*’s consignment of dollars came into Britain on the eve of hostilities with Spain, after Moore’s capture of the treasure-frigates (No. 7).


12. November–December 1804. ‘The Spanish ship Agila Corodora of 500 tons burthen, from Cartagena [S. America] to Ferrol, laden with cotton, logwood, and a quantity of dollars, was taken by the Malta Man-of-War and is arrived at Falmouth.’

*Sources of treasure*: Colombia, Peru, Chile? Cartagena in Venezuela was an important treasure-port on the ‘Spanish Main’.
ORIGIN OF SPANISH DOLLARS ACQUIRED BY BRITAIN, 1799–1805

Naval Chronicle, xiii (1805), p. 88 (Lloyd's Marine List of Ships Lost and Captured). H.M.S. Malta was a French prize, the Guillaume Tell, taken off Malta in 1800.

13. 'The Spanish Brig Estrella Divina from Vera Cruz to Barcelona, with 268,950 dollars, and a valuable cargo, was taken 8th February, by the Endeavour, M'Millan [Master], of Liverpool, and since taken possession of by the Egyptienne Frigate, who took out the specie, and is arrived at Falmouth.'
Source of treasure: Mexico. Reference: As above.
Note: The Endeavour was presumably a Liverpool privateer, or a merchantship with a Letter-of-Marque; it seems hard on her captain that the Navy should deprive him of his windfall.

14. 5 January [1805]. 'Arrived from a cruise off the coast of Spain, the Diamond, 36 guns, Cap. Elphinstone, with a most beautiful Spanish corvette, the Infante Carlos, from the Havana, was despatched to Corunna; laden on the King of Spain's and merchants' account with a valuable cargo and 120,000 dollars in specie.'
Allowing for a lapse of time in reaching Plymouth, this should probably be included in the 1804 captures.

15. 'Came in the Naiad of 36 guns, Captain Dundas, from a cruise off the coast of Spain, with a large rich Spanish ship, bound to a Port in Spain, with 200,000 dollars on board; besides a valuable cargo of sundry dry goods.'
Source of treasure: Uncertain (Spanish America).
Reference: As above. An 1804 capture?

16. 'The Spanish ship Providence, of 350 tons, from Montevideo to St. Andero [Santander?], with hides, tallow, cotton, etc., and 14,000 dollars, has been taken and carried into Jersey, by the Lottery Privateer of that Island.'
Source of treasure: S. America.

17. 'The Sacra Familia,—from Vera Cruz, with sugar, logwood, and 149,000 dollars; and the Fortuna,—from Vera Cruz, with mahogany, logwood, and 432,000 dollars arrived at Plymouth 7th March [1805].
Source of treasure: Mexico.
Note: These two vessels were prizes to Lord Cochrane in H.M.S. Pallas—see No. 19 below.

18. [27 January 1805]. H.M.S. Amazon (Captain William Parker), cruising off the Spanish coast. The Chase showed Spanish Colours. She was overtaken and boarded. The officer returned, hardly able to articulate from excitement.
'She is the Gravina, Sir, of 6 guns.'
'Well, what is her cargo?'
'Oh, Sir, she has hides and indigo.'
'That is capital'; but seeing that the Lieutenant was still more excited, 'Anything else?'
'Yes, Sir, cochineal!'
'Still better. What is the matter? Any more?'
'Sir, she has three hundred and thirty thousand dollars in hard coin beside!'
The dollars were transferred to the Amazon, and on the 12th [February] she captured a brig from Rio de la Plata to Cadiz, with 8,300 more dollars, besides her cargo.
The Amazon arrived at Gibraltar on the 20th, and finding that the garrison was short of money, William Parker supplied the Commissariat with all the dollars, receiving Government Bills for his share and Nelson's (the latter's amounted to £10,000). The Amazon's crew were paid part of their prize-money (? in dollars) on the 24th–25th. Parker rejoined Nelson off Toulon and presented him with the
172 ORIGIN OF SPANISH DOLLARS ACQUIRED BY BRITAIN, 1799–1805

£10,000 (his share as Commander-in-Chief). The actual amount of specie in the Gravina was 127,000 dollars in addition to her cargo. Parker's share from the two prizes amounted to at least £18,653, though he is not specific on this point in his letters home. He probably made a fortune of £20,000.

Source of treasure: Vera Cruz in Mexico.

The Life of Admiral Sir William Parker, by Rear-Admiral Augustus Phillimore (1876), i (1781–1830), pp. 266 ff. (Phillimore was Flag-Lieutenant to Parker in the 1830s, and the above episode was told to him by the Admiral.)

Note: It is probable that the greater part of this treasure never came to England, as it went into the pockets of the Gibraltar garrison, and also to the prize-court at Malta where the ship was finally condemned. Some dollars may have got to England eventually as prize-money of the Amazon's company.


Quoting the local Plymouth newspaper. (Square brackets are mine.)

February 24th [1805]—came in the “Carolina” from Havannah, with sugar and logwood, captured on the 12th instant off the coast of Spain by the “Pallas” of 32 guns, Captain Lord Cochrane. The Pallas was in pursuit of another with a very valuable cargo when the Carolina left. His Lordship sent word to Plymouth, that if ever it was in his power, he would fulfil his public advertisement (stuck up here) for entering seamen, of filling their pockets with Spanish “pewter” and “Cobs”, nicknames given by the seamen to ingots and dollars.

March 7—came in a rich Spanish prize with jewels, gold, silver, ingots and a valuable cargo, taken by the “Pallas”, Captain Lord Cochrane. Another ship, the “Fortuna”, from Vera Cruz, had been taken by the “Pallas”, laden with mahogany and logwood. She had 432,000 dollars on board, but has not yet arrived.

March 23—came in a most beautiful Spanish letter-of-marque of fourteen guns, said to be a very rich and valuable prize to the “Pallas”, Captain Lord Cochrane. [The Fortuna.]

[Ibid., p. 109]: ‘A still greater sensation was excited by the arrival of the “Pallas” herself, with three large golden candlesticks, each about five feet high, placed upon the mast-heads. The history of these is not a little curious. They had been presented by the good people of Mexico, together with other valuable plate, to some celebrated church in Spain, the name of whose Patron Saint I forget, and had been shipped on board one of the most seaworthy vessels.

Their ultimate destination was, however, less propitious. It was my wish to possess them, and with this view, an arrangement had been made with the Officers and crew of the “Pallas”. On presenting the candlesticks at the Custom-house, the authorities refused to permit them to pass without paying the full duty, which amounted to a heavier sum than I was willing to disburse. Consequently, although of exquisite workmanship, they were broken in pieces and suffered to pass as old gold.’

[p. 111]: ‘Of the proceeds of the above-mentioned captures—all made within ten days—Sir William Young, on the strength of having recopied my orders from the Admiralty, claimed and received half of my share of the captures. No wonder that Lord St. Vincent said of him, that he wished “to have the power of giving orders, and so share prize-money”.

Source of treasure: Mexico, S. America.

Naval Chronicle, xiii and xiv (1805) and Thomas, tenth Earl of Dundonald (Lord Cochrane), The Autobiography of a Seaman (1861), pp. 107 ff.

Notes: 1. These ‘ingots’ must be bars of tin, not gold. They figure largely in the cargoes of the ships taken by Moore. The term ‘Cob’ was usually applied to the irregularly shaped and lumpy Peru dollars, though Mexico must have been represented on this occasion.

2. The Port-Admiral at Plymouth. He behaved most ungenerously on this occasion and showed great animosity against Cochrane in later years. Cochrane’s orders were received directly from the Admiralty and Young had therefore no authority over him. By recopying the Admiralty orders in his own name, Young automatically put the Pallas on his Station (Plymouth), and was therefore entitled to a Flag-Officer’s share in all her prizes. Naturally Cochrane resented this sharp practice, but, as he admits, he could not complain too much as he made a personal fortune of £70,000, even without his famous candlesticks. His gesture of hoisting them to his mast-heads on entering Plymouth was characteristically flamboyant, and quite in keeping with his promise to the seamen of ‘filling their pockets’ with Spanish treasure. Neither was calculated to appease Sir William Young!
20. **February–March 1805**: ‘The N[uestra] S[enora] del Rosario, Spanish ship of 200 tons, from River Plata, laden with 70,000 dollars, cochineal, coffee, sugar and logwood, was captured about 18 days since off the Western Islands, by the Uranie Frigate, and is arrived at Falmouth.’

*Source of treasure*: South America.


21. ‘The Polacre Judas Jodes, with 80 troops, and 12,000 dollars; the ship Reysarias [*?* Rosario] Pearl [*?* Perla], with skins, cinnamon, copper, and 112,000 dollars; the Polacre Virgin del Carmen, in ballast, and 10,750 dollars; and a vessel with 6,800 dollars, were [all] detained in the Mediterranean, by the squadron under the command of Lord Nelson, between 18th November and 5th December [1804].’


22. ‘The Ecce Homo, from the River Plate; The Astegarasa Register Ship, from Lima; The Princesa de la Paz, from River Plate; the Brilliante, from Vera Cruz, all laden with specie, cochineal etc. are taken by the Endymion Frigate, and arrived at Portsmouth.’

*Source of treasure*: Mexico and S. America. Amount not given.

*Reference*: As above. *Note*: The ‘Register Ship’ was an official treasure ship from Mexico or Peru.