The Ports of the Canary Islands: The Challenges of Modernity

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Introduction

The evolution of the archipelagos of the Canary Islands, Madeira and Cape Verde, has been conditioned by their insularity, small size and scarcity of land resources. However, this has not been an insurmountable obstacle to economic growth. On the contrary, from the beginnings of European overseas expansion, their privileged geographic position in the African Atlantic, along with institutional factors, allowed them to become fully integrated in the Atlantic trade networks. Since the mid-nineteenth century, with the expansion of free trade and the beginnings of steam navigation, the role of the Islands as stopover platforms between Europe, America, Africa and Oceania increased, consolidating their position as communications nodes along with the triumph of steam navigation and imperialist expansion. The demand generated enabled new growth potential in these areas allowing, as can be seen in the Canary Islands, the diversification of production structures thanks to the growth and development of port services.

The present chapter is structured in four sections after this introduction. In the second section the main characteristics of the activity in the ports of La Luz-Las Palmas and Santa Cruz de Tenerife in the Canary Islands between 1850 and 1929 are analysed and compared with competitors such as Funchal (Madeira), San Vicente (Cape Verde) and Dakar (Senegal), using different indicators (traffic, fuel supplies and goods movement). The purpose is to measure certain factors affecting the role of ports as communications nodes in the mid-Atlantic. In the third section the endowment of infrastructures of the ports of Santa Cruz de Tenerife and La Luz-Las Palmas de Gran Canaria and the role of central government (public sector) and enterprises (private sector)
in this process are studied. In the fourth section the most significant changes in public and private management of ports are commented on, focusing on the business response to them and the consequent influence on demand and competition between ports. Finally, the last section contains the most relevant conclusions.

2 Port Activity

Port activity has been essential for the economic development of the islands, as they lack alternative infrastructure, especially for the entry and exit of goods and, for the period in question, passengers. Moreover, the intensification of the international movement of goods, passengers and capital in the Atlantic sparked interest in certain island spots as communications nodes depending on several variables, such as geographic location, openness to trade and the availability of resources and labour (Carreira, 1982; Correia e Silva, 1998; Câmara, 2002; Suárez Bosa and Cabrera Armas, 2012). The analysis of port activity reveals three major phases, corresponding to changes in Atlantic navigation.

In the first phase, from the mid-nineteenth century to the beginning of the 1880s, we witness the gradual expansion and transformation of port services due to the development of steam navigation and the need to provide coal, water and food. This led to a change in the design and functions of the ports. Steamers required specific physical and material conditions: deeper waters, large bays and sheltered harbours or places to carry out operations and, in general, more complex and expensive infrastructure and material resources (Zimmermann, 1983). The growth of port activity in the ports of La Luz-Las Palmas on the island of Gran Canaria and Santa Cruz de Tenerife on the island of Tenerife at this stage, unlike other mid-Atlantic ports (Mindelo on the island of San Vicente in Cape Verde and Funchal in Madeira), was not specifically linked to international transit traffic, but to internal factors such as the fishing and commercial activity generated by the cultivation and commercialisation of cochineal in Europe in 1852 and the passing of a decree (which became law in 1870) which declared the main ports of the Canary Islands Free Ports (Puertos Francos), liberalising exports and almost all imports (Bourgon Tinao, 1982; Cabrera Armas, 1997). By contrast, in the port of Mindelo and to a lesser extent that of Funchal, the majority of port activity was linked to the supply of coal to steamers in transit, as can be observed in the 97-per cent correlation between the two variables between 1855 and 1885 (Suárez Bosa and Cabrera Armas, 2012). In that period (1855–85), Mindelo supplied around 65 per cent