
The Sea and Its Impact on a Maritime Community: Vila do Conde, Portugal, 1500-1640

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This essay is a case study of a small Portuguese maritime town involved in overseas shipping and trade in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹ It utilizes a wide range of sources, including notarial deeds, parish records, town council minutes, tax registers, Inquisition proceedings, legislative files and a number of documents dealing with shipping and trade between 1500 and 1640. I argue that Vila do Conde, as well as a number of other maritime communities, developed in particular ways due to Portuguese overseas expansion. Moreover, this historic process had dramatic effects on the town's economic, social and demographic profiles.

Vila do Conde: An Overview

To understand Vila do Conde we need to comprehend its major characteristics. First, the town had a limited population. The total number of inhabitants fluctuated between 3600 and 5000 in the period 1500-1640; this corresponded to about 0.32 percent of the country's estimated population in 1527 (see figure 1). Second, the town contained almost no land suitable for agriculture. Indeed, arable land comprised less than eight square kilometres within the administrative area and only about one-half square kilometre of the actual urban territory (see figure 2). Third, the town had minimal financial resources. Municipal income was always deficient relative to financial needs (see figure 3). Consumption taxes were used to pay for the most important public works. This was possible

¹Amélia Polónia, "Vila do Conde. Um porto nortenho na expansão ultramarina quinhentista" (Unpublished PhD thesis, 2 vols., University of Porto, 1999); this will be published as *A Expansão Ultramarina numa perspectiva local. O porto de Vila do Conde no século XVI* (2 vols., Lisboa, 2006, forthcoming). See also Polónia, "Reformulation de stratégies économiques en temps de guerre. L'étude d'un cas. Portugal, XVI-XVIIe siècles," in *Guerre et Economie dans le Monde Atlantique du XVIe au XXe. Siècle. Stratégie en Échec, Logiques d'Adaptation* (Bordeaux, forthcoming); and Polónia, "L'insertion dans l'axe maritime comme facteur structurant d'une communauté urbaine. L'étude d'un cas. Portugal, XVIe Siècle," in *Présence et Représentations du Monde Atlantique dans les Villes d'Europe Occidentale du Moyen Âge au XXe siècle* (Rennes, forthcoming).

because, despite its minimal population and small territory, the town was able to maintain high levels of internal consumption (see figure 4). Fourth, the socio-economic structure was dominated by maritime and merchant groups. For example, in 1568 almost sixty percent of the population was involved in overseas trade and transport, shipbuilding or associated industries, although this share decreased in the late sixteenth and the first decades of the seventeenth century (see figures 5 and 6). Finally, the town enjoyed a status in which landlords could exercise considerable power. In the early modern period, Vila do Conde became an ecclesiastic and landlord territory under the control of the Santa Clara Monastery and the house of Bragança.² This was responsible for both the weakness of local power and the heavy taxation of the most important economic activities, including fishing. The only economic sectors exempted from this burden were shipping and trade, areas in which the central government retained sole control over taxation and administration.

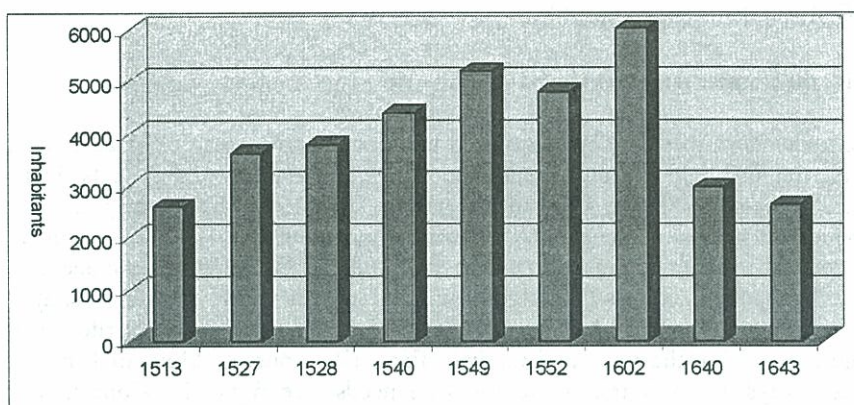


Figure 1: Population Growth of Vila do Conde (1513-1643)

Sources: Carlos da Silva Tarouca, *Cartulário do Mosteiro de Santa Clara de Vila do Conde* (Vila do Conde, n.d.), doc. II-A, 39; A. Braamcamp Freire, *Povoação de Entre Doiro e Minho no XVI século* (Lisboa, 1905), III, 261; D. João de Barros, *Geographia d'Entre Douro e Minho e Tras-os-Montes* (Porto, 1919), 47; National Archive, Torre do Tombo (IAN/TT), Conv. Sta. Clara V. Conde, cx. 44, mç. 16; Chanc. D. João III, lv. 14, fl. 79; Conv. Sta Clara V. Conde, cx. 40. mç. 11; Conv. Stª Clara Vila Conde, cx. 37, mç. 7, fl. 8; Chanc. D. João III. Privilégios, lv. 2, fl. 240; Chanc. D. João III, lv. 6, fl. 27; and Chanc. D. João III, Privilégios, lv. 3, fl. 199-199v.; and Vila do Conde Municipal Archive (AMVC), lv. 1877, fl. 31v.-193v.

²The Braganças were among the principal landlords in Portugal; the family assumed the crown 1640 with the ascension of John IV.



Figure 2: Map of Municipal Growth

Source: Courtesy of the author.

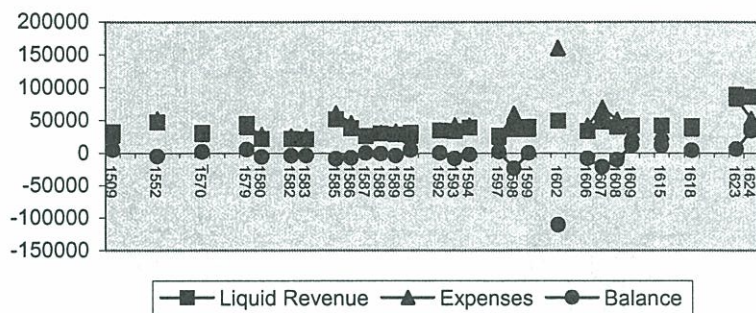


Figure 3: Council Revenue and Expenses (*reais*)

Sources: AMVC, lv. 827 a 853, e lv. 16, fl. 200v-211v.

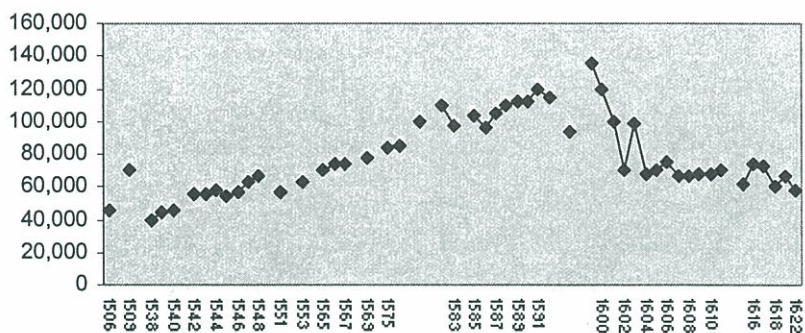


Figure 4: Revenue from Taxes on Wine and Meat (*reais*)

Source: AMVC, lv. 16, fl. 119 e 125-127; and lv. 1580 a 1610; and Porto District Archive (ADP), Fundo Notarial, V. Conde, 1^o Cart., 1^a e 3^a sr., *passim*.

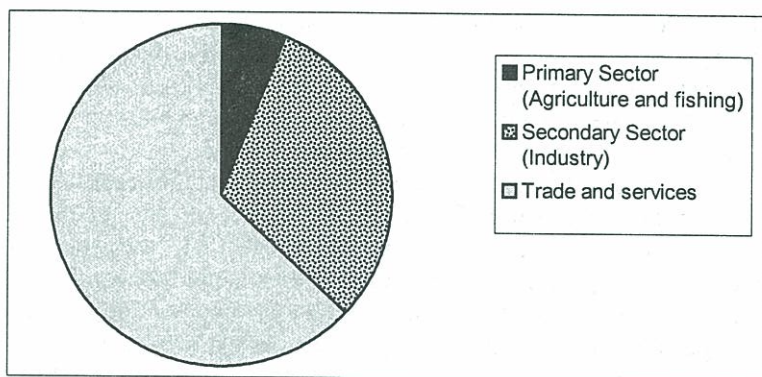


Figure 5: Percentage of *Derrama das Sisas* Paid by Various Groups, 1568

Note: The *sisas* was a tax applied to every exchange, whether property or merchandise. The values were reported to a *derrama*, and a capitation value was established to reach an annual level fixed by the Crown.

Source: AMVC, lv. 1699.

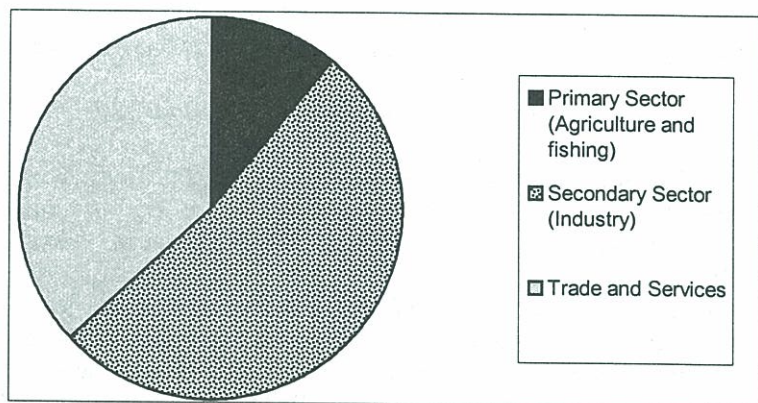


Figure 6: Percentage of *Décima* Paid by Various Groups, 1643

Note: The *décima* was a tax for military purposes, payable by all households and on professions, except for the clergy who paid a different tax.

Source: AMVC, lv. 1877.

Bounded by a river with limited navigation, and by three of the most important municipalities in northwest Portugal – Porto, Maia and Barcelos –

the sea became the geographic centre and a source of economic sustenance and opportunity for Vila do Conde. Lacking human, political and financial resources, this little community is a fine example of how to attain national and international prominence by taking advantage of a combination of circumstances which were favourable at a particular point in time.

This panorama suggests that the particular conditions created by Portuguese overseas expansion had a significant impact on this type of coastal community. But the propitious opportunities created by overseas trade and shipping were grasped differently by various communities according to local conditions and perceptions. While the model adopted by Vila do Conde represented a specific rather than a global approach, certain general aspects can be highlighted that frame the vast social and economic dynamics in Portuguese maritime regions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The model used in Vila do Conde is based on the importance of maritime industries, including shipbuilding, rope and sail making; a significant merchant fleet (one of the largest in terms of capacity in the country); and a specialised body of seamen. Between 1500 and 1620 there were a total of about 1665 mariners, including 1110 sailors and 555 pilots and masters. Vila do Conde was a village with an occupational structure dominated by maritime transport and trade. Moreover, its people were imbued with a small-scale capitalist mentality and developed a business system ruled by small investments and multiple partnerships. When traditional shipping and transport were in crisis, emigration was an alternative.

Overseas Expansion: Structural Implications for Vila do Conde

Within this framework, it is clear that these particular conditions and options had a major structural impact on the community. Figure 7 depicts this situation. Five relationships are apparent: political, economic, social, demographic and familial.

We can begin with the political. In early modern Portugal, as in other European *ancien régime* societies, the legal system controlled access to local power. The rules systematized in legislative documents, such as the Manueline Ordinances, provided that only nobles were eligible to be city officials.³ Yet despite the law (and the existence of a small aristocratic community), the power elite in Vila do Conde was dominated by two groups from within the maritime sector: masters and pilots on the one hand and merchants on the other. The municipal laws allowed for equal representation of "landed gentlemen" and "seamen," even though the latter were regarded until 1625 as "mechanics" – men who earned their livelihood by manual labour. Although this legal status should have removed them from the power structure, this did not

³*Ordenações Manuelinas* (1797; new ed., 5 vols., Lisboa, 1984). These ordinances were a legislation compilation of the kingdom of Manuel I.

happen.⁴ The importance of each group in municipal power circles varied over time (see figures 8 and 9). The role of the landed gentry grew during the trade crisis of the late sixteenth century when the number of seamen in the village decreased; this suggests a direct connection between economic trends and political power.

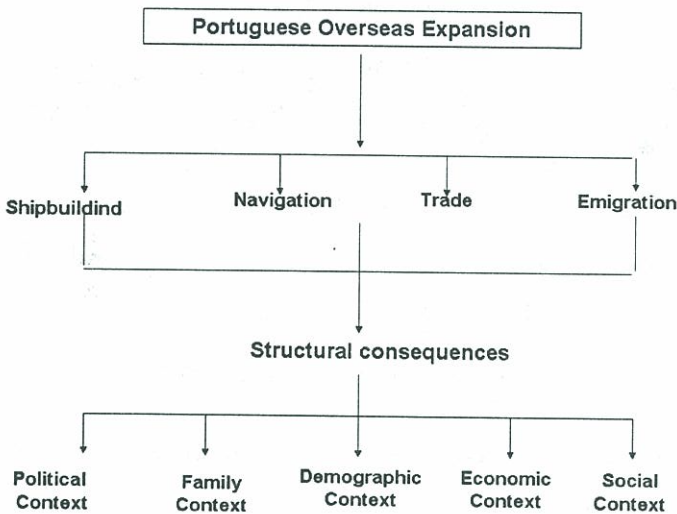


Figure 7: Portuguese Overseas Expansion

Source: Courtesy of the author.

Despite this rotation in leadership between landed gentry and seamen, the list of official duties illustrates both the consolidation of new criteria conferring eligibility for political power and the furthering of new economic and social groups based upon nautical knowledge and economic power linked to overseas trade. Expertise and economic power, the bases of social advancement in modern Europe, were already outlined and firmly established in sixteenth-century Vila do Conde. Yet both the spirit and the letter of the law, not to mention traditional practice, prescribed the opposite. This, then, is one of

⁴Amélia Polónia, "Elites sociais e elites de poder em sociedades marítimas. Estudo de um caso: Vila do Conde no século XVI," in *O Poder Local em Tempo de Globalização. Uma História e um Futuro* (Visue, 2005).

the main domains in which seafaring experience, through overseas voyages, introduced new dynamics which overturned the traditional mechanisms for advancing personal careers. This obviously was a consequence of the social significance and strategic value of nautical communities in the emerging Portuguese overseas empire.

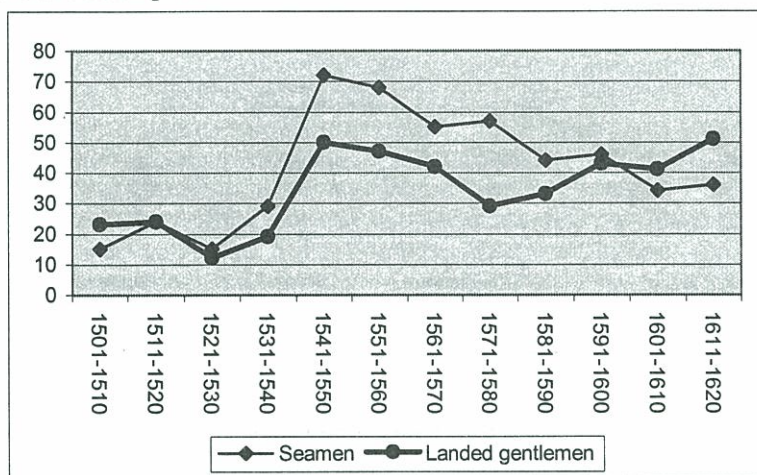


Figure 8: Numbers of Seamen and Landed Gentlemen on Council, 1500-1620

Source: AMVC, lv. 16 a 26.

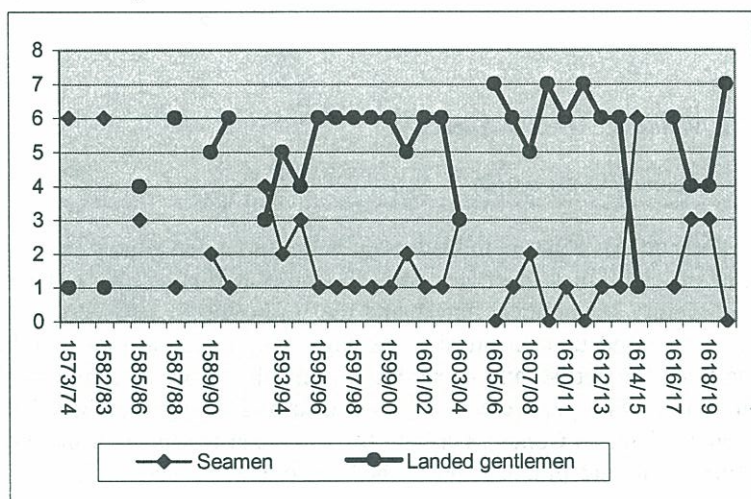


Figure 9: Board Members Elected to Misericórdia, 1573-1619

Source: ASCMVC, Livros de Receita e Despesa, 1573-1620.

There were also economic shifts which entailed a number of essential strategies. One involved the sharing of risks through the spread of investments among several economic initiatives. Another was the resort to credit and alternative financing schemes to obviate the shortage of capital. Among others, these techniques included mortgaging vessels still under construction; borrowing against freights that had not yet been earned; using advance freight payments so that owners and crews could invest in trade and other mercantile activities; advancing parts of future inheritances; and selling assets. All these innovative mechanisms testify to the attraction of overseas trade. A third strategy was reflected in the multiplication of so-called "profit-and-loss contracts," in which gains and losses were split equally between the capitalist and trader. A fourth trend was the creation of mercantile societies with a large number of small-to-medium participants. The constitution of trading networks involving foreign merchants with greater financial capacities was yet another technique favoured especially by the merchants of Porto and the so-called "New Christians."⁵ Finally, there were partnerships between the maritime and merchant communities (see table 1).⁶ These strategies supported a significant overseas trade and navigation despite territorial, demographic and financial weaknesses.

No. Participants	Occurrences	%
2	42	60.9
3	11	15.9
4	7	10.1
5	2	2.9
> 1	1	1.4
> 2	2	2.9
> 4	1	1.4
> 14	1	1.4
> 20	1	1.4
Others	1	1.4
Total	69	100

Source: ADP, Fundo Notarial. V. Conde, 1^o cart., 1^a, 2^a, 3^a e 4^a ser., *passim*.

⁵The community of New Christians resulted from the Christianisation of Jews in Portugal after 1500; they were called "New" to distinguish them from the "Old Christians." Strict legislative ordinances ostracised them until the eighteenth century, and the persecutions of the Inquisition forced a significant number to leave the country. Once overseas, many became the international agents of Portuguese overseas trade.

⁶Amélia Polónia, "Redes informais de comércio ultramarino," in *Estudos em Homenagem a Luís A. de Oliveira Ramos* (Porto, 2004).

There were also a variety of social consequences. First of all, the male population became more mobile, which was reflected in increased internal migration and overseas emigration. Traditional modes of social control failed to constrain social behaviour within acceptable bounds. We can confirm this from increasing rates of prostitution; growing instances of marginal behaviour, such as bigamy and polygamy, as well as a few scattered cases of female homosexuality; and high rates of illegitimacy and child abandonment.⁷ The municipal authorities proved incapable of responding effectively due to the lack of powers to encourage integration and provide social assistance. Finally, there was the problem of integrating new groups, such as slaves and foreigners, with distinct social characteristics and different ethnic and religious standards.

As a seaport, Vila do Conde was relatively cosmopolitan and at any time contained a large number of transient males. This in turn led to some deviant social practices. Indeed, a society marked by great population mobility and social instability was more susceptible to the emergence of potentially disruptive phenomena. One of these was prostitution. Although condemned morally, prostitution was, in fact, socially accepted as long as it did not threaten social structures and public health. It is difficult, however, to determine its real dimensions, since its marginal nature did not generate a plethora of documentation. Indeed, town hall directives are the only documents which point to the extent of the problem. It is clear that the attitudes of the town authorities shifted over time from tolerance to a more punitive, restrictive stance, either because of a rise in this activity or because stricter ethical-religious codes were triggered by Catholic reformers.

In 1502, the council banished from the town a *manceba do partido* (a kept woman) on the grounds of public health.⁸ In 1513, it ordered the arrest of a woman of ill repute because "dishonest things" allegedly took place in her house.⁹ But by 1550 there was a tacit acceptance of the situation; instead of repression, the council opted for integration when it decided to confine prostitution to certain streets on the town's periphery.¹⁰ The attitude was the same in 1599.¹¹ But between the end of the century and 1640 a repressive attitude led

⁷IAN/TT, Inquisição de Coimbra, Vila do Conde proceedings.

⁸AMVC, lv. 16, fl. 75.

⁹*Ibid.*, fl. 360v.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, lv. 18, fl. 346.

¹¹*Ibid.*, lv. 24, fl. 313.

to the registration, arrest and banishment of prostitutes.¹² Some of the motives for these actions were linked to marginal activities, such as the sheltering of prevaricators and escaped slaves and the high death rate of newborns.¹³

From these measures, it seems that the number of prostitutes was increasing. Yet it also seems that there was a clear distinction between prostitutes who lived in the town and those from other areas; it is likely over time that the latter group grew more rapidly.¹⁴ The town thus came to embody a way of life distinct from the surrounding rural world. For this reason, Vila do Conde attracted not only males from the countryside but also women, many of whom initially intended to go into service but who eventually became prostitutes.¹⁵ Prostitution also seems to have been associated with two other trends: increases in infant mortality and in the number of illegitimate children.¹⁶

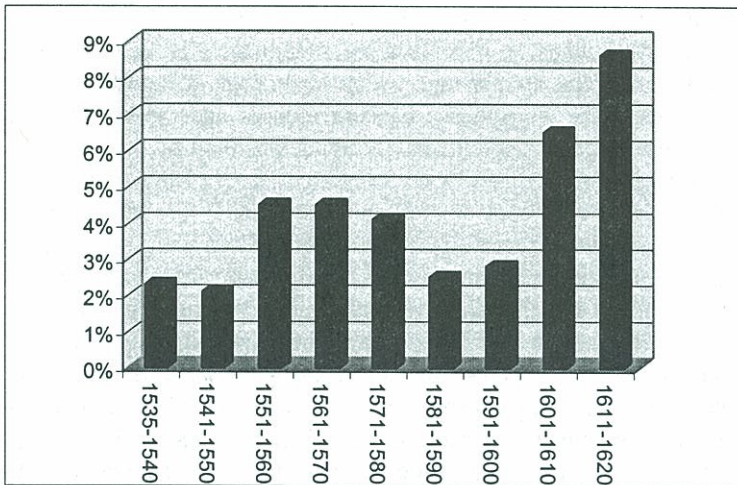


Figure 10: Illegitimacy Rates, 1535-1620

Source: ADP, Fundo Paroquial, V. Conde, Baptismos, lv. 1 e 2.

¹²*Ibid.*, lv. 26, fl. 297v.-298, 430; lv. 28, fl. 238-238v.; lv. 29, fl. 34v.-35 and 36-36v.; and lv. 36v.-37 and 95-96.

¹³*Ibid.*, lv. 26, fl. 297v.-298; and lv. 29, fl. 36v.-37 e 95-96.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, lv. 24, fl. 323v.-324v.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, lv. 26, fl. 297v.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, lv. 29, fl. 36v.-37 e fl. 95-96. We do not know if this practice refers exclusively to the death of newborns or also includes miscarriages.

There was an equally inseparable relationship between dissolute behaviour and illegitimacy that transcended the restricted universe of prostitution and touched broad socio-professional and economic strata. If degradation of customs and sexual promiscuity between masters and servants or slaves were two aspects of this phenomenon, intense geographic mobility and the constant presence of a transitory maritime population may also have contributed to the high rates of illegitimacy. This phenomenon is considered here in its broadest sense, covering all baptisms that recorded births out of wedlock. In Vila do Conde there were 259 illegitimate children out of 6600 births (three percent) between 1535 and 1620. It should be noted, though, that this phenomenon was not evenly distributed chronologically (see figure 10). Despite data limitations, a rising trend is obvious, especially in the first two decades of the seventeenth century, when illegitimate births comprised 6.5 and 8.6 percent, respectively. These figures suggest a more disorderly society.

Directly related to the issue of illegitimacy is that of foundlings, mostly newborns. This is a matter which is difficult to appreciate given the lack of sources. Here we will use baptism records and the council's revenue and expenditure ledgers, since their upbringing was paid by the town.¹⁷

In the first source there were only eight cases of the baptism of foundlings, only about 0.1 percent of the total. But other information suggests that this number is an underestimate because these children were generally brought up by families outside the town. For this reason, it is possible that these foundlings were baptised not in Vila do Conde but in the rural parishes in which they resided. Because the council's archive of foundling records has not survived, and because the expenses of their upbringing were seldom recorded in the council's revenue and expense ledgers, the only evidence available is a declaration by the council's officers in 1546, when a request for royal permission to create an extra tax was made. One of the reasons given was the high expenses of caring for foundlings:

there are many foundlings in the Town as Your Honour the Magistrate knows, when consulting the accounts every year, and there is no-one to care for them because there is no manner in which to pay them; women who care for them have

¹⁷On the institutional and jurisdictional framework of assistance to abandoned children, see Isabel dos Guimarães Sá, "A assistência aos expostos no Porto. Aspectos institucionais (1519-1838)" (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Porto, 1987); and Sá, "Abandono de crianças, infanticídio e aborto na sociedade tradicional portuguesa através das fontes jurídicas." *Penélope*, No. 8 (1992), 75-89.

been sentenced and imprisoned for this, as Your Honour saw many times.¹⁸

The fact that, under threat of a prison sentence, certain families were obliged to care for foundlings, together with the imposition of an extra tax intended for this purpose, seems to suggest that at least in this decade there were a significant number of foundlings, and the council had difficulties in providing for their upbringing. Perhaps in response to the difficulty of finding townspeople to take foundlings, the council systematically resorted to homes in the rural boroughs, such as S. Simão da Junqueira, Estela and Balasar.

The evolution of spending on foundlings (see figure 11) was similar to the pattern for illegitimate children. There was a noticeable decline in the 1580s and 1590s. The effect of the plague of the former decade on the town's demographic and socio-economic structures certainly played a role, either by contributing to a drastic reduction in the number of foundlings or to the council's inability to provide for them. Again, the rise in the early 1600s and, in particular, in 1620, can be explained by the scenario referred to earlier: the rise in prostitution and the increase in the number of illegitimate children.

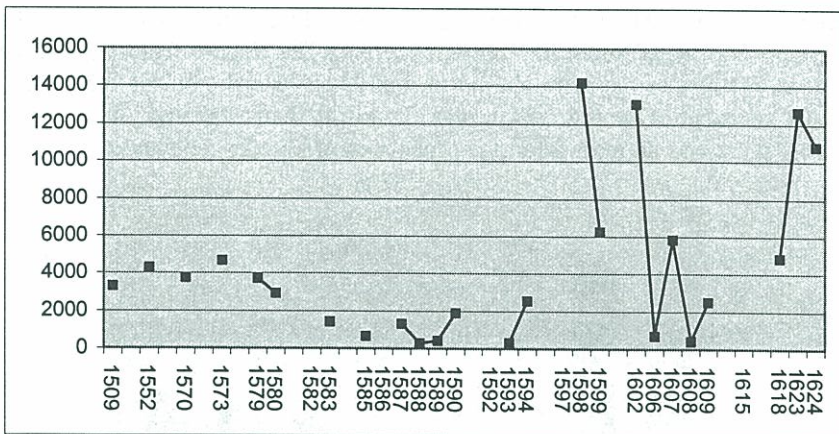


Figure 11: Annual Spending on Foundlings, 1509-1624

Source: AMVC, lv. 16, fl. 200v.-211v.; and lv. 827 a 853.

Prostitution, illegitimacy and the abandonment of minors were thus social practices that, although distinct, were interconnected, co-existing at different levels of social marginality and mirroring, each in its own way, devia-

¹⁸*Ibid.*, lv. 121, fl. 169v.

tions from what had been the norm. Even though similar patterns existed to a greater or lesser extent throughout the urban areas of the kingdom, the contours apparent in Vila do Conde were directly related to the profile of its population structure and maritime emphasis.

If these phenomena suggest marginality or deviance, there are others that may be considered more normal and which perhaps had more important long-term implications. We refer here to demographics and family structures.

One of the main factors structuring the demography of Vila do Conde was, without doubt, its highly mobile population. Both emigration and internal migration shaped the demographic profile of the port town. An analysis of birth rates shows that there was insufficient natural growth to offset the variety of population losses. Nonetheless, population grew when shipping and trade flourished, largely because the municipality was able to attract migrants from its hinterland. This is apparent from an analysis of marriage records, which reveal a high rate of exogenous unions (see figure 12). Between 1560 and 1620, the percentage of marriages involving bridegrooms from the hinterland comprised between thirty-eight and sixty-one percent of the total.

At the same time, overseas expeditions, trade and emigration showed the same trend: an exodus of males, whether temporary or permanent, for various durations. The male/female ratio of Vila do Conde reveals a clear discrepancy from what might have been expected. The figures from baptism records were close to the historical norm, but death records, on the other hand, showed an adult male rate which was far lower than expected. As a consequence, there was an increase in the proportion of females (see table 2).

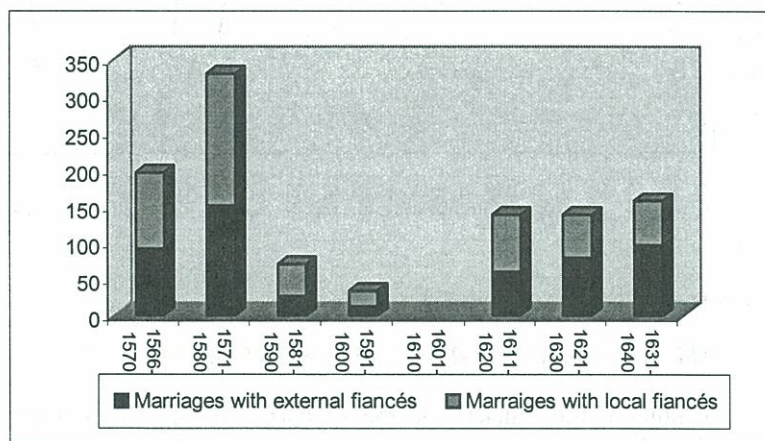


Figure 12: Marriages in Vila do Conde, 1566-1640

Source: ADP, Parish Records, V. Conde, Marriages, lv. 1 and 2.

Table 2
Comparative Masculinity Rates

Periods	Masculinity Rate at Birth	Masculinity Rate at Death
1535-1540	92.3	
1541-1550	97.3	
1551-1560	99.3	
1561-1570	100.5	
1571-1580	113.0	
1581-1590	107.9	
1591-1600	92.5	44.3
1601-1610	89.2	63.4
1611-1620	96.9	59.0
1621-1630	111.7	77.4
1631-1640	131.7	65.9
Average	101.1	64.1

Note: The masculinity rate is the number of male births or deaths divided by the number of female births or deaths times 100.

Source: ADP, Fundo Paroquial, V. Conde, Baptismos, lv. 1 e 2; and Óbitos, lv. 1.

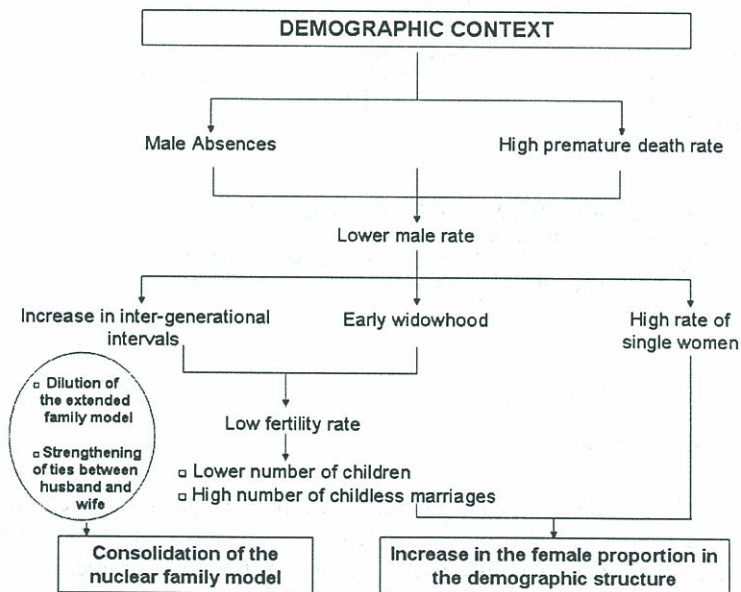


Figure 13: Model of Demographic Consequences

Source: Courtesy of the author.

When we compare those numbers with the findings of Louis Henry for European societies (an average value of approximately 105), we can see that the birth rate was lower than the norm but still within reasonable margins.¹⁹ At death, on the contrary, the values were so obviously low that the only explanation was the migration of males. It is therefore clear that family units could not remain intact. Indeed, low fertility rates, caused by large inter-generational gaps; marriages without children; a considerable number of unmarried women; and a high rate of early widowhood were also outcomes of this circumstance (see figure 13).

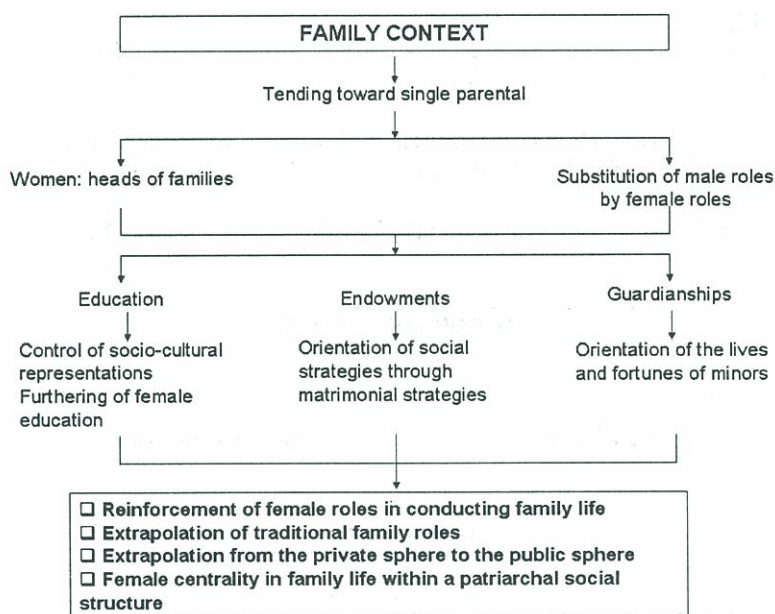


Figure 14: Model of Family Consequences

Source: Courtesy of the author.

One of the main consequences was single-parent families, which made women the heads of households. As a result, women increasingly were responsible for the maintenance of family order, particularly among families of seamen, merchants and shipbuilders, the groups that represented the most significant proportion of the active male population in the town (see figure 14). Fur-

¹⁹Louis Henry, *Técnicas de Análise em Demografia Histórica* (Lisboa, 1988), 26-29.

thermore, the male absences were keenly felt by the women who remained behind. Indeed, several women in the same family often had husbands, fathers, brothers or even male children away at the same time. This central role in family life does not seem to have been assumed through confrontation but rather through default. Thereafter, however, it was not restricted to the periods of absence; instead, it became part of the family structure in the town.

The massive male (and some female) internal migration also diluted the extended family, since familial roots were often outside of the community, and reinforced the nuclear family by strengthening the ties between husband and wife, often underpinned by the absence of children, due to an increase in intergenerational intervals and early widowhood. In fact, by attracting a large and young male population from the agricultural hinterland, a large number of uprooted individuals were present. Even when they married in Vila do Conde, their family roots remained precarious, which is why we can identify, in proxies and wills, several cases in which the bonds of trust between husband and wife became closer. This was also visible in the business world, where husbands transferred economic responsibilities to their wives.

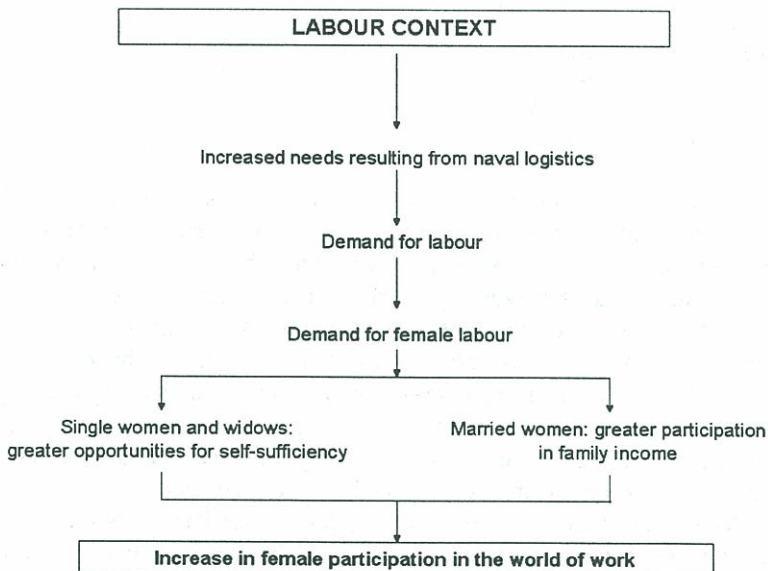


Figure 15: Model of Labour Consequences

Source: Courtesy of the author.

Mobility and the absence of males also created a growing demand for female labour, giving single women and widows a better chance of achieving self-sufficiency. This in turn led to lower rates of marriage and remarriage, as well as a larger role for married women in providing family income and social control. This issue may be analysed from the perspective of female participation in the world of work (see figure 15).

Data from the poll taxes show that this reality was also reflected in the number of female heads of households and reveal not only the prevalence of this practice but also its economic relevance. Still, the data also show a greater percentage among those who paid the least in taxes. The 115 female heads of household comprised eighteen percent of those who paid the poll tax in 1568, but they owned only thirteen percent of the taxable wealth. In 1643 the 300 women heads of household represented forty-three percent of the total, although their taxable wealth was only nineteen percent.

Table 3
Female Households and Taxation Rates in Poll Taxes

Poll Taxes	Number of Taxpayers	Women Heads of Households	% of Female Taxpayers	% of Female Taxation
Conveyance tax (1568)	639	115	18	13.0
Tithe (1643)	697	300	43	19.3

Source: AMVC, lv. 1699 e 1877.

Widowhood quite often transformed these women into heads of households without implying their involvement in the labour market or their inclusion among the taxpayers. This is why the table reveals a rather small female role in the taxable working market. In fact, among the 300 women mentioned in the 1643 poll tax, only twenty-two (7.3 percent) were classed as workers, filling jobs such as servant, innkeeper, laundress, baker, weaver, grocer, yeaster, saleswoman, and wax-chandler. Something similar was apparent in the 1568 poll tax in which only twenty-one percent of the women registered were identified as workers, filling the same jobs plus *cabaneiras* (cottagers), *covideiras*, bakers, shop assistants and crockery dealers.

These data may be compared with those from Porto, also a maritime city but with even more commercial activity. There were clear differences. One was that in Vila do Conde in 1643, forty-three percent of the tithes were paid by households headed by women, while in Porto in 1698 the same group accounted for only nine percent of entries.²⁰ This reveals diverse social dynam-

²⁰Oporto Historical Municipal Archive (AHMP), Lv. 1414, Lançamento da Décima da Cidade Velha. For further developments, see Amélia Polónia, Helena Osswald and Rui Esperança, "As Décimas no século XVII. Classificação ocupacional e

ics in the two locales, especially since Porto's administrative, political and economic relevance, and its more complex socio-professional structure, undervalued the role of maritime activities and diminished the impact of male absences.

The documentation in Porto is more concrete regarding female occupations, mentioning them in forty percent of the entries registered. Of these, there was a few involved with small-scale commerce (e.g., saleswomen), textiles (weavers, seamstresses and spinners), as well as laundresses and journeywomen. When women worked as an extension of their husbands' occupations, they were totally absent from the tax records. This was the case with tailors and weavers, for instance. Also worth noting were those engaged in manual work but without being identified with a specific occupation. These might be the parallel universe of the Vila do Conde *cabaneiras*, women who lived in their own homes and provided for themselves through independent work. In Vila do Conde in the 1620s, there were recurring complaints about those who arrived as servants but ended up working in their own homes.

Table 4
Women in Notarial Acts: Distribution According to Marital Status

Marital Status	Number	%
Single	59	5.5
Married	332	31
Widowed	681	63.5
Sub-Total	1072	100
Nuns	16	
Unspecified	129	
Total	1217	

Source: ADP, Fundo Notarial, V. Conde, 1^o cart., 1^a, 2^a, 3^a e 4^a ser., *passim*.

When we analyse the poll taxes relative to female participation not in the handicraft but in the business sector, the omissions are also clear. This is a result of the influence of gender in taxation criteria, as well as professional classification. In these documents the female presence is thus remarkable but not a subject of systematic categorization. The same could be said about the guilds and professional bodies, as we can see in the city's daily life and in council records. But this kaleidoscope does not provide satisfactory answers about female work. We will therefore explore another approach using notary records to identify not only the economic activities but also the social and economic productivity of women. The evidence reinforces the conclusion that in the absence of males women took charge of the functions they usually would

not have been permitted to perform. Besides education, these included the endowment and marriage of children and the management of family businesses. The frequency with which women participated in public acts can be seen in the notarial records: of approximately 4000 acts (or registers) between 1560 and 1620, about 1200 refer to women, not only as participants but also as central agents (see table 4). The analysis confirms one expectation: the prevalence of widows among those involved in notarial acts (63.5 percent belonged in this category, compared to thirty-one percent who were married and 5.5 percent who were single). The single-parent family transferred a variety of obligations and functions to women. The significant role of married women, on the other hand, was caused largely by the absence of men in this maritime society.

Table 5
Powers and Functions Performed by Women in Notary Acts

Areas of Intervention	Powers and Functions Performed	Number	%
Society	Adoptions	2	0.2
	Guardianships	2	0.2
	Institution and administration of chapels	3	0.3
	Granting	3	0.2
	Ransoming captives	3	0.2
	Drawing up wills	5	0.4
	Endowments	89	7.1
Justice	Judicial interventions	185	14.6
Administration	Post possession	3	0.2
Economics	Ecclesiastical and fiscal rents	6	0.5
	Guarantees	38	3
	Shipbuilding	3	0.2
	Signing of apprenticeship contracts	6	0.5
	Ship management	13	1
	Provision of voyages	1	0.1
	Trade	19	1.5
	Credit	34	2.7
	Negotiation of assets	351	27.6
	Money collection and quittances	460	36.3
Others	Financial investments	11	0.9
	Exercising diverse powers	33	2.6
Total		1270	100.3

Source: See table 4.

Table 5 shows the wide variety of functions that women performed. Among the most important were the collection of goods and money, the in-

v involvement in judicial proceedings and the establishment of endowments. Some of these activities were performed in *motu proprio*, while others entailed delegation. The latter was especially common in the collection of assets and judicial proceedings, areas in which it was imperative to have a male mediator. The percentage of such occurrences is highly significant. Among the registered acts, the percentage of endowments, which were essential in establishing marital alliances and uniting assets and families according to economic, political and social interests, are notable. Other functions that should be highlighted were linked with the drawing up of wills, the creation and administration of chapels, adoption, pardons, and the concession of slave freedom and guardianship. The guardianship of sons, grandsons or collateral relatives led these women to positions of significant power, with great responsibility in the supervision of many lives and fortunes. Finally, the ransoming of captives was actually more frequent than is found in the documents. Taken as a whole, these practices comprised about nine percent of the sample.

Finally, there are the economic aspects. In the trade of goods, which was almost exclusively of real estate and implied buying, selling, exchanges and summons, the actions by these women comprised 22.5 percent of the total registered here. Besides the collection of money and goods, many of which were due to deaths abroad, others occurred due to businesses closing down. Women also participated in tax guarantee partnerships, both ecclesiastical and fiscal; provided guarantees to businesses; intervened in trade; invested or collected money for shipbuilding by the royal armadas; managed ships, albeit by delegation; celebrated professional apprenticeship contracts; and engaged in credit or financial transactions with their own money. In total, economics were the largest group of occurrences in the sample, comprising seventy-four percent of all demale notarial acts. These findings are similar to those reported by Émile Coornaert for Flanders.²¹

If we examine the sociological profile of the women involved, the prevalence of those related to seamen, especially pilots, or merchants is apparent (see table 6). But these numbers can only be understood if we cross-reference them with information about the specific acts performed (see table 7). Male absences, followed by death overseas, comprised 64.4 percent of the reasons for the acts registered. If to these we add the cases of capture by piracy and those relating to captivity – all of which were related to shipping and/or overseas trade – the importance of the maritime dimension in Vila do Conde's internal dynamics is highlighted even more clearly.

²¹E. Coornaert, *Les Français et le commerce international à Anvers* (2 vols., Paris, 1961), II, 68-69.

Table 6
Family Relations of Women Involved in Notarial Acts

Professional Grouping of Direct Family Members		
	Number	%
Clergymen	1	0.1
Military Men	1	0.1
Squires/ Knights	29	3.6
Officials	45	5.6
Mechanics	47	5.9
Merchants	75	9.4
Seamen/Skippers/Pilots	601	75.2
Total	799	100

Source: See table 4.

Table 7
Direct Motivations for Notarial Acts Led by Women

Direct Motivations	Number	%
Male captivity	4	0.7
Guardianships	34	5.7
Business	73	12.2
Widowhood	101	16.9
Deaths Overseas	173	29.0
Male Absences	211	35.4
Total	596	100

Source: See table 4.

The reinforcement and extension of female social roles, demonstrated in the examples discussed, implies the need for better preparation and qualification to intervene in public with authority and autonomy. This is apparent in the frequent signature of public acts by the women involved, done *in motu proprio* and without the need for mediators, even though they sometimes authenticated acts in which their validation was essential. This matter is directly linked with another aspect: the self-representation of women and their assumption of power and authority.

In *ancien régime* societies, illiteracy was widespread and, with only a few exceptions, women were excluded from education. Thus, it should not be expected that the women related to seamen and merchants would have been able to sign the notarial acts. This was, in fact, the reality: in only about 196 of roughly 1200 acts (sixteen percent) were the women able to sign their names. Yet it may be even more important to note that despite the barriers to acquiring literacy skills, some women were able to affix their signatures firmly and clearly. Many of these women undoubtedly knew how to write – and not only their own names. A case in point was Francisca Carneira, the wife of a pilot, who wrote her own will. Another was Catarina Henriques, who main-

tained her own account books and credit records.²² Such women not only performed the traditional domestic roles but also assumed functions that extended into the public domain (see figure 16).²³

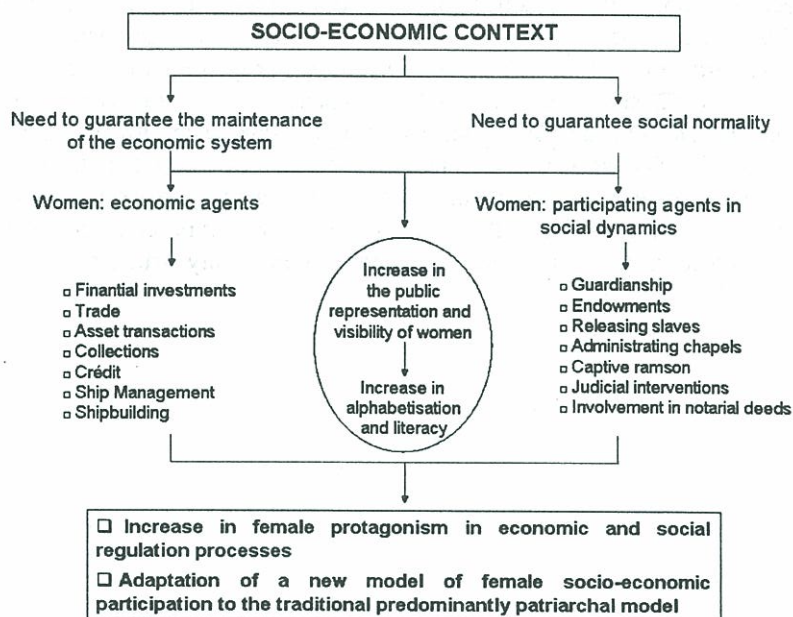


Figure 16: Model of Socio-Economic Consequences

Source: Courtesy of the author.

²²For further developments of these issues, see Polónia, *A Expansão Ultramarina*, I, 797-818.

²³On these matters, see Amélia Polónia, "Ocupações femininas em sociedades marítimas (Portugal, Século XVI)," *Mare Liberum*, Nos. 18-19 (Dezembro 1999-Junho 2000), 153-178; Polónia, "A mulher face à expansão ultramarina. Quotidiano feminino e ausências masculinas. O estudo de um caso: Vila do Conde no século XVI," in *Em torno da História das Mulheres* (Lisboa, 2002), 107-124; Polónia, "Espaços de inclusão de agentes femininas no processo de expansão ultramarina portuguesa (século XVI)," in *Simpósio Os Espaços Femininos no Mundo Americano, Séculos XVI a XIX. Cultura, Resistência e Poder* (Ponta Delgada, 2002); Polónia, "De Portugal a espaços ultramarinos. Inclusão e exclusão de agentes femininas no processo de expansão ultramarina (Século XVI)," in Dora Davila Mendonza (ed.), *Historia, Género y Familia en Iberoamérica, Siglos XVI-XX* (Caracas, 2004); and Polónia, "Women's Contribution to Family, Economy and Social Range of Maritime Communities," *Portuguese Studies Review*, XIII, No. 1 (forthcoming).

Conclusion

This case study is based upon systematic data analysed over time. By examining a small seaport community the evidence underscores our original thesis: the sea was not only a positive factor in development but also shaped the community's horizons by enabling it to develop other growth mechanisms. But what was true for Vila do Conde was not necessarily the case in cities like Porto or Lisbon, since their fates did not depend solely upon overseas maritime expansion. Vila do Conde had an umbilical link to maritime opportunities, which is why the human, economic, social and cultural growth patterns there were so determined by the sea. Moreover, maritime experiences tended to condition the way of life of the community over the years, enhancing values and social patterns that framed the town and the community structurally.