The sea as inevitability. The sea as a decisive factor in the construction of a maritime community. Interactions applied to a case study (Portugal, 16th Century)

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This paper presents some conclusions based on a case study, centred on a small Portuguese maritime town involved in overseas shipping and trade routes during the 16th century. It is a summary approach that integrates contributions from a research project presented for doctoral assessment at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Porto. Its conclusions were drawn from an analysis of documental corpora that include notarised deeds, parish records, town council minutes, tax registers, Inquisition proceedings, central archive documents, legislative corpora and a number of sources dealing with shipping and trade activities, covering the period from 1500 to 1640.

The paper is supported by research work proving that the construction of the maritime community of Vila do Conde and its metropolitan and overseas standing resulted from overseas Portuguese expansion, with the interaction of two variables: 1. the circumstances and challenges emerging from a specific historical dynamic, namely, overseas Portuguese expansion; 2. the conditions that imposed the sea as an inevitability and the maritime route as a singular axis of prominence.

The research project also locates the take-off of this small urban community, which had no evident significance in the mediaeval period, during the sixteenth Century, a time when it achieved a renown and visibility linked to its self-construction, based on:

- a limited number of men (which oscillated between 3600 and 5000 inhabitants in the period between 1500 and 1640, corresponding to 0.32% estimated figure for the country in 1527);

- a minimal implantation and territorial domain (the municipality has almost no agricultural landscape, amounting to no more than 8 sq km of the administrative area and 0.5 sq km of actual urban occupation);

- a minimal financial resources and economic power;

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- a socio-economic structure dominated by maritime and merchant groups (in 1568 almost 60% of the population were involved in overseas trade and transportation, shipbuilding and other associated industries, according to a municipal tax roll), and in which the aristocracy are a minority;
- a jurisdical status where landlords enjoyed considerable power. This was responsible for both the weakness of local power, and the heavy taxation of the most important economic activities, including fishing. The only domains excluded from this tax burden were shipping and trade, areas in which the Government retained sole control of taxation and administration.

**[SLIDE 1. Vila do Conde – a Portuguese seaport]**

Bounded by a river of limited navigability, and by three of the most important municipalities in Northwest Portugal, defining its hinterland, the sea thus became simultaneously its geographical and economic means of sustenance and projection.

In fact, this little community, lacking human, political and financial resources, is a fine example of prominence achieved at a national and overseas level, taking advantage of a combination of circumstances which happen to be favourable at a particular moment in time, with the sea as its only way out. This would seem to prove that the particular conditions created by the Portuguese overseas expansion in the 15th and 16th centuries were bound to have a significant impact on coastal communities, expanding their role and participation.

**[SLIDE 2. Portuguese Overseas Expansion]**

It is our thesis, however, that the propitious opportunities created by overseas trade and shipping were appropriated differently by different communities, and led to varied economic and social models, according to particular local conditions, geo-economic and social profiles. The model described here is thus the result of a specific answer to global contexts. Even though this functional model cannot be extrapolated to other maritime spaces unaltered, we believe that certain general aspects can be highlighted, which structurally frame the vast social and economic dynamics found in Portuguese maritime regions during the 16th and 17th centuries.

**[SLIDE 3. Vila do Conde Economic and professional profile]**

The model we recognise in Vila do Conde indicates the prevalence of naval logistics and industries (shipbuilding, rope and sail making industries), a significant naval fleet (one of the most important in terms of transportation capacity at national level), and a specialised body of seamen (we identify at the period under study (between 1500 and 1620 a total of 1665 seamen: 1110) sailors and 555 pilots and ship’s masters. It is also a village with:
- a socio-vocational structure where activities linked to maritime transport and trade predominate;
- an economic universe dominated by capital flow, imbued with a capitalist mentality and mechanisms, albeit operating on a small scale;
- a business system ruled by small capital investments and multiple partnerships.

Along with the crisis affecting Portuguese overseas trade and shipping this community also sees emigration as an answer to local problems caused by the failure of traditional shipping and sea transport investments.

This paper discusses how these particular conditions and options were bound to have a major structural impact on the community, not only at an economic level, but also in power local elites, family, demographic and social contexts. The following diagram summarises our position.

[SLIDE 4. Portuguese Overseas Expansion]

Five correlations are shown: one is established with political contexts; the second with economic dynamics; the third with social behaviour, the fourth with demography and the last one with family structures. We shall start with the first one - the political contexts.

A. Interactions with the political and jurisdictional context. The resurgence of power elites

In Early Modern Portugal, as in other European ancien régime societies, we are in a clear situation where the legal system tightly controls the criteria for access to local power. The rules prescribe that only the most noble inhabitants of the city are eligible to be city officials. In spite of what is established by law, what we see in Vila do Conde is the configuration of a distinctive power elite, based on two groups attached to a maritime economy: ships’ masters and pilots on the one hand, and merchants on the other. And this is in spite of the existence of a small aristocratic community. The municipal laws allow for equal representation of “land men” and “seamen”, even though the seamen were regarded as ‘mechanics’ until 1625, that is, men who earned their living by manual work. Such legal status should thus remove them from the power structure. But our case study leads us precisely to the opposite. The rotation 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 on nautical knowledge and on economic power linked to overseas trade. Knowledge and economic power: the bases of social
advancement in Modern European Societies, are already outlined and firmly established, in 16th Century, in the community we are looking at.

[SLIDE 5. Political Context]

We intend to show that the construction of new power elites and the definition of other ascending groups is, in this case study, based on these new criteria, even if both the spirit and the letter of the law, not to mention traditional praxis, prescribed the very opposite. This, then, is one of the main domains in which seafaring experience, through overseas voyages, has introduced new socio-vocational dynamics, which turn the traditional political prestige criteria and the mechanisms for advancing personal careers upside-down. This is, obviously, a consequence of the social significance and strategic value of nautical communities in the Portuguese overseas empire, still in a process of construction.

Other areas reflect a similar prevalence, in Vila do Conde, of criteria based on maritime priorities. That was true to a great extent with the economy.

B. Interactions with the economic context

We are looking at a village dominated by shipbuilding, naval transport, maritime trade, as mentioned earlier. A village dominated by circulating capital, steeped in capitalist mentality and mechanisms, even though implemented on a small scale; a trading world governed by partnerships, where even the women and other less important social groups have their place. And so we can see some essential economic strategies:

- The risk-sharing, based on the division of investments among several economic initiatives;
- The multiplication of the so named "profit and loss contracts", in which losses and profits are split 50-50 between the capitalist and the trade agent;
- The constitution of mercantile societies, based on a large number of small or medium participants in partnerships;
- The constitution of trading networks that involve foreign merchants with greater financial capacity;
- The association of two professional groups- the maritime community and the merchant one, in joint strategies and functional complementarities.

The strategies identified were able to support a significant presence of such communities in overseas trade and navigation, and in maritime logistics, despite territorial, demographic and financial frailties.
C. Interactions with the social context

The social consequences to be noted are related to the definition of a society with a maritime profile, correlated with some typical social phenomena, confirmed and proved in our case study. Here we can only indicate several complex processes, such as:

- The complexity of the social and religious contexts, related to the integration of new social segments, like slaves and foreign communities, especially from Northern Europe, in a time of religious schism;
- The mobility of the male population, responsible for large fringes of uprootedness and social instability and conflict;
- The breakdown of traditional safeguards and social control, failure to constrain social behaviour within acceptable bounds. We can confirm this from increasing rates of:
  - Prostitution;
  - Phenomena of marginal behaviour, such as bigamy and polygamy, recorded in Inquisitorial proceedings;
  - Some, albeit exceptional, cases of female homosexuality;
  - Illegitimacy and abandoning of children;
  - Many cases of poverty and social marginality.

[SLIDE 7. Social Context]

Phenomena to which the municipal power reveals itself incapable of responding effectively, due to the inexistence, at the appropriate time, of new procedures to encourage integration and provide social assistance.

If these phenomena may be seen as betokening marginality or deviance, then there are others, that may be considered normal, that are even more structuring in this community, and have stronger long-term implications. We mean the demographic and social schemes.

D. Interactions with the demographic and family context.
One of the main factors structuring the demographic dynamics of Vila do Conde is, without doubt, the highly mobile profile of its population. Not only the overseas emigration, but internal migration, too, shaped the demographic model of this port. If we analyse the birth rates, we can see that there is insufficient natural growth to cope with the multiple forms of demographic losses. Yet, we still see demographic growth while the shipping and trade conditions remain favourable. This is due to the municipality's ability to make significant demographic gains from the rural hinterland. This is an accurate conclusion of the analysis of the marriage records, for instance. We can see high rates of exogenous marriages, involving mostly male agents. Between 1560 and 1620, the percentage of marriages involving couples from the exterior varies between 38 and 61% of the total.

At the same time, overseas expeditions, trade and emigration were aspects that nurtured the same flow: an exodus of male agents, whether temporary or permanent, for short periods or long. This is borne out by the urban male ratio of Vila do Conde, which reveals a clear discrepancy in relation to the expected rates. The figures from baptism records were close to those indicated as normal in historical demographics, but the results obtained from death records, on the other hand, present a profound variance; here, the adult male rate is far lower than expected. As a consequence, we note an inevitable increase in the female rates in this population universe.

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 also emerge as understandable demographic outcomes of these circumstances.

One of the main consequences of this scenario is that of single-parent families, conferring on women the status of heads of households. As a result, there is an increase in the number of women who appear to be responsible for the maintenance of family order, particularly among families of seamen, merchants and shipbuilders, the groups that represent the most significant proportion of the active male population in the town under study. Furthermore, in these socio-professional segments, the absences were keenly felt by the women who remained behind. Considering the strategic endogamic tendencies, a woman, or several women in the same family, could often have husband, father, brothers, and even children, all away at the same time.

[SLIDE 8. Demographic context]

Mobility and multiplied male absences had another powerful impact in terms of demographic, family and labour contexts. The demand for labour in a society deprived of its male population is also responsible for a growing demand for female labour and economic
participation. This process gave single women and widows a better chance to be self-sufficient, leading to lower rates of marriage and remarriage, as well as increasing the part played by married women relative to family income and social control.

[SLIDE 9. Labour Context]

In fact, these women not only amplified their traditional roles in the organisation of domestic tasks, such as the education of children and care for home stability, they extensively extrapolated the attributes ascribed to them by Christian norms, by also assuming functions that go beyond the private domestic sphere into the public social sphere, as the contemporary notarial records make quite clear.

But this central role in family life does not seem to have been assumed in confrontation with the male universe, but rather through active complementarity, that is, it is adopted during male absences. We believe, though, that in the long term, this protagonism became a structuring element of female performance in the domestic sphere, and even in the social sphere. Thus it was not restricted to the longer or shorter periods of absence of the head of the household, on the contrary, it became a structural mark. In fact, some evidence, which we cannot analyse in more detail here, points to certain attitudes of confrontation, even at a legal level, when the rights and functions these women assumed as their own were disrespected.

Uprootedness, resulting from massive male migration, together with significant female migration, although less in numerical terms, also tended to contribute to the dilution of an extended family model and reinforced a nuclear-type family organisation, where the ties between husband and wife were strengthened, and often underpinned by the absence of children, due to the increase in intergenerational intervals and early widowhood. Population mobility, documented in historical demographic studies, contributed decisively to this tendency in our case study. By attracting a vast young male population from the agricultural hinterland around the seaports, these spaces concentrate a large number of uprooted individuals. Even when they marry, their family roots remain precarious.

[SLIDE 10. Family Context]

In the demographic and family context we are examining, we find cases of destructured families, as well as cases where bonds of trust between husband and wife become closer. These can be found recorded in proxies and wills. This trust is also extended to, and visible in, the world of business, where husbands transfer economic responsibilities to their wives, thus revealing a clear relationship of trust. These tendencies and practices can be shown by the SLIDE 12.

[SLIDE 11. Socio-economic Context]
We can, thus detect in this micro-community some features that have structured Modern European Society.

To sum up, by contributing to male absences and implementing factors of social instability, the process of overseas expansion, when analysed over time, reinforced the roles of those who stayed behind. They were given the responsibility of guaranteeing the normal functioning of community life. It was women who systematically assumed many of these functions, through a perceptible increase in their social, economic and family protagonism.

**[SLIDE 12. Portuguese Overseas Expansion]**

E. Implications for urban construction and the municipal architectural profile

To conclude the discussion on the structural implications of a community constructed on the basis of a maritime economy and on seafaring experiences, which were determining factors in the case studied, we shall look at a last sphere of prominence: that related to urban space and architectonic features.

Since the take-off of this village was directly connected with the sea and maritime capital and trade, today’s Vila do Conde is necessarily a reflection of its golden age: the era of sixteenth century overseas expansion.

If we walk through Vila do Conde town centre, we come into contact with urban signs of that time at every turn: the town hall was built in that century, as well as the customs house, the watermills, the quays; the defence structures – its maritime fortification; the Misericordia House; the Hospital; as well as the most important houses. Those which are left characterize the urban fabric and bring the aesthetic patterns of Manuoline style to the present day.

If we focus on religious buildings, we have the cathedral, the church of Misericordia, the São Francisco Monastery, the chapel of Socorro, built by a pilot on the India route; the Seamen’s Chapel; the São Roque Chapel. All were built in that golden age, with public and private capital provided by the maritime and overseas expansion, and by the enterprise of numerous agents of Portuguese shipping and overseas trade.

**[SLIDES 13 to 21]**

Vila do Conde’s layout as we see it now is thus the reflection of a lifestyle whose roots are deeply connected with maritime experiences and maritime financial resources, which proves the determinism of its overseas prominence in the development of this community.
If we wish to prove otherwise, we can examine the memory we try to reconstruct from a different point of view. We can analyse the development indicators in times of shipping crises and the deconstruction of the overseas empire, that is, at the very opposite of its golden age. Even in the 16th Century, from the third quarter, when Portugal was losing its mastery of the seas, when piracy was on the increase, when Portugal was no longer a central part of a European economy based on overseas networks, we have nothing more than declining figures: in the demographic growth rates; in the number of seamen; in the size of the naval fleet, and even in architecture, that symbolic representation of power and prominence.

[SLIDE 22. Decline indexes]

To sum up: this case study, based on a micro approach, has allowed us to construct a mode founded on systematic data gathered and analysed over time. It configures the construction and reconstruction model of a small seaport community, underscoring our original thesis: if the sea appears as an inevitability and as a factor of development, it also emerges as a restrictive horizon that enables the same community to develop other growth mechanisms and products.

We should also stress that this model is not necessarily the same that would emerge for cities like Porto or Lisbon, since, while it is undeniable that they have seen their prominence connected, in the Early Modern Age, with overseas maritime expansion, they did not depend solely on its outcome. On the contrary, the seaport we have studied has an umbilical link to maritime opportunities. That is why its human, economic, social and cultural growth indicators are so much determined by the maritime experience. Furthermore, the sea experiences tended to condition the way of life of this community over the years, leaving structural signs that have even lasted to the present day. Such experiences also enhanced values and social criteria that became more visible, and were developed far earlier in some societies than on others. We might note what has been said about the new local power elites, the imaginative capitalist mechanisms, improved effectiveness, even if on a small scale, or about the roles adopted by women in that society.

That is why our thesis initially assumed that the favourable opportunities created by overseas trade and shipping were appropriated differently by different communities, and that they determined a range of economic and social models, according to particular local conditions, geoeconomic and social profiles. The model we are presenting is thus to be understood as a specific answer in global contexts, and it can only be justifiably sustained in societies with a similar profile.
Portuguese Overseas Expansion

Navigation

Trade

Emigration

Male Absences

Family Context
- Reinforcement of female roles
- Extrapolation of traditional family role
- Extrapolation from the domestic sphere to the public sphere
- Consolidation of the nuclear family model

Demographic Context
- Increase in the female proportion in the demographic structure

Labour Context
- Increase of female participation in labour

Socio-Economic Context
- Increase of female protagonism in economic and social regulation processes
- Adaptation of the new model of female participation to the old social, predominantly patriarchal model

Increase of female protagonism in the family, social and economic context
LABOUR CONTEXT

Increased needs resulting from naval logistics

Demand for labour

Demand for female labour

Single women and widows:
greater opportunities for self-sufficiency

Married women: greater participation in family income

Increase in female participation in the world of work
Socio-economic context

Need to guarantee the maintenance of the economic system

- Women: economic agents
  - Financial investments
  - Trade
  - Asset transactions
  - Collections
  - Crédit
  - Ship Management
  - Shipbuilding

Need to guarantee social normality

- Women: participating agents in social dynamics
  - Guardianship
  - Endowments
  - Releasing slaves
  - Administering chapels
  - Captive ransom
  - Judicial interventions
  - Involvement in notarial deeds

Increase in the public representation and visibility of women

Increase in alphabetisation and literacy

- Increase in female protagonism in economic and social regulation processes
- Adaptation of a new model of female socio-economic participation to the traditional predominantly patriarchal model
DEMOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

Male Absences

High premature death rate

Lower male rate

Increase in inter-generational intervals

Early widowhood

High rate of single women

Low fertility rate

- Lower number of children
- High number of childless marriages

Consolidation of the nuclear family model

Increase in the female proportion in the demographic structure

- Dilution of the extended family model
  - Strengthening of ties between husband and wife
FAMILY CONTEXT

Tending toward single parental

Women: heads of families

Substitution of male roles by female roles

Education

Women: heads of families

Endowments

Guardianships

- Control of socio-cultural representations
- Furthering of female education

- Orientation of social strategies through matrimonial strategies

- Orientation of the lives and fortunes of minors

- Reinforcement of female roles in conducting family life
- Extrapolation of traditional family roles
- Extrapolation from the private sphere to the public sphere
- Female centrality in family life within a patriarchal social structure