
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 Um porto nortenho na expansão ultramarina quinhentista" (Unpublished PhD thesis, 2 vols., University of Porto, 1999); this will be published as *A Expansão Ultramarina numa perspectiva local.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 XVIIe 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.

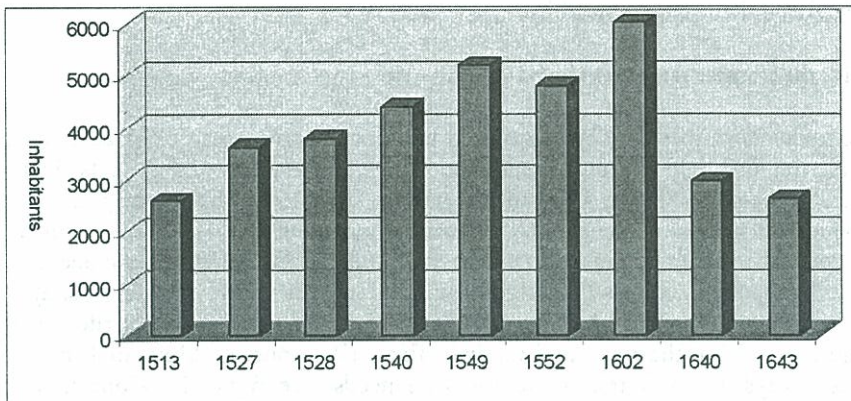


Figure 1: Population Growth of Vila do Conde (1513-1643)

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. St^a 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.