

HISPORTOS

The history of NW Portuguese Seaports in the Early Modern Age
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European Seaport Systems in the early modern age - a comparative approach

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HISPORTOS – PARTIAL RESULTS AND PRODUCTS. PROGRAMME FOR THE NEXT STEPS*

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Having presented some of our research results, a pertinent question is put forth: what are the next steps, having decided that it is worthwhile to continue?

The problem is not to define the way, but rather how to maintain the necessary conditions to proceed with our team work. But we are optimistic, and hopefully we will be able to continue, with or without new public funding.

We are of the opinion that the next steps undoubtedly consist in further exploring the materials obtained by the different members and teams, and consequently conduct a detailed, comprehensive analysis of the data gathered, from the perspective of the geomorphologists, engineers, urbanists, climatologists and, naturally, the historians. Even though the databases will be made available to the scientific community as a whole and the public in general, namely on the Internet, it is still our responsibility to produce analytical overviews, capable of answering some of the questions raised:

- In what way did the geomorphological conditions interfere with the potentialities of each seaport;
- In what way did the crown, the local authorities and politics interfere with the construction of harbours and the development of individual seaports and sea towns;
- In what way were the technological advances in Europe implemented in each port in Northwest Portugal, and what were the local outcomes of these dynamics;
- How did the several seaports in these historical and geographical spaces interact with each other and in what way were they part of a larger hierarchy - regional, national, European and intercontinental.

And finally, it is imperative to answer the main question:

- Is there a Northwest Portuguese system in the Early Modern Age?

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Concurrently, we have to broaden and deepen the studies on the cartographical reconstitution of seaport infrastructures and geomorphological dynamics from a diachronic perspective. This is one of the most productive ways to project and reveal the evolution of seaport spaces from a long-term perspective and to answer the questions raised above.

But it could also become a priority for us to truly explore the perspective we have subscribed since the beginning, to consider seaports not only in their geomorphological constraints and as infrastructural systems, but also as global historical complexes. We would then be able to proceed with an analysis of seaport history in its entire complexity: its demographic, social, economic, urban, administrative, cultural, religious and psychological aspects.

We can further propose some issues to be examined in future research. The first is governed by the need to find answers to three central questions:

1. How did the harbours under study develop over time? Was there a true seaport system in terms of infrastructures or were medium-sized and small ports in the Early Modern period, like those studied in NW Portugal, simply provided with quays and small slipways and, possibly, a dock? And does this apply to the entire period as a whole, or is there a moment in which we can identify the expansion of construction in harbour facilities? This issue is linked with another one:

2. Is there any policy regarding harbour and seaport development, either local or royal, and which are the main landmarks in these processes? Besides the public authorities, which agents, either individual or institutional, were central to the construction and development of harbours and seaports?

3. The third question is linked with a key issue: was harbour construction determined by the historical development of seaports, or, on the contrary, was there any interaction between harbour construction and seaport accessibilities and the internal development of seaport dynamics? Or further, were there any other variables which could explain seaport development, such as geomorphological constraints, intentional and strategic royal policies, or random opportunities? In global terms, what we aim to question is which were, over the times, the main factors behind the sustained development of seaport spaces.

The answer to this question depends on the study of the overall rates of historical dynamics, not only in terms of seaport movement or economic indicators, but also of seaport prominence or decline as a whole. Thus, studies should be conducted centred on:

Demographic dynamics, prospecting the centripetal forces exercised by the sea town over the surrounding countryside and a more or less extended hinterland, and its consequences on population movements, internal demographic structure, immigration and emigration rates, and so on...

Economic dynamics: definition of key sectors of the local seaport economy – fisheries, ship construction, transport and navigation, local, international or overseas trade, finances; industry, and the intersections between them, as well as their interaction with conjunctural and structural tendencies, and the definition of economic strategies over time.

Political dynamics: the study of internal political tendencies and the emergence of oligarchies and local elites and their interaction with maritime segments and

maritime and harbour dynamics. Interactions with the political and jurisdictional context. The resurgence of power elites.

Social dynamics. The social dynamics to be noted are related to the definition of a society with a maritime profile, correlated with some typical social phenomena. Here we can only indicate several complex processes, such as: the mobility of the male population, together with internal and overseas emigration, when applicable, 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 boundaries. We can evaluate this from increasing rates of prostitution; phenomena of marginal behaviour, such as bigamy and polygamy, and cases, albeit exceptional, of homosexuality and sexual deviance; high rates of illegitimacy and abandonment of children; the integration of new communities, such as slaves and foreign groups with distinct social behaviours and ethnic and religious standards; the study of the emergence of new elites and new mobility criteria, as well as an analysis of social phenomena intersected with seaport movement and maritime experiences, mostly long-distance navigation and trade: the internal criminality, prostitution, illegitimacy; foundlings; implications on familial structure are, then, some of the topics to be treated, along with comparative studies on distinct profiles of fishing, trading and navigation societies, for instance.

Urbanization dynamics: the construction of an urban fabric; the evaluation of urbanization rates intersected with harbour structures and economic indicators; the construction of an urban profile involving or excluding the harbour, the seaside or the riverfronts; the construction of an architectural image intersected with wealth rates, financing capital and external patterns suggested by the seaport network connections.

Technological dynamics: the presence of foreign techniques, responsible for the import and application of foreign models of harbour construction; the application of new technological models and its implication on the local labour universe and on internal development rates; the involvement of a smaller or greater part of the population in technological plans and interventions,...

Religious dynamics: the study of religious fishermen and sailor corporations, the specific maritime spiritual demonstrations resulting from particular spiritual constraints and devotional profiles; the appearance of devotional and ritual phenomena exclusive to the maritime communities; the construction of a particular religious space, ...

This proposal undoubtedly configures an ambitious plan, which we think could nevertheless be accomplished in the long term, depending on several interdependent factors.

The micro-analysis is one of the main conditions in achieving the reconstitution of the overall historical dynamics of each seaport. But, even following a micro approach, these research projects should follow the same research plan in order to provide comparative approaches, especially with European sea towns and harbours in the Early Modern period.

The research that has already been accomplished on outcomes involving economic and social studies centred on some of these ports, namely Porto, Aveiro and Vila do

Conde, could be implemented in a comparative and wide-ranging way; and the Masters theses being prepared on these same spaces for different periods and from distinct perspectives, included in the branch in Seaports Studies, part of the Masters Course on Local and Regional Studies, taught at this Faculty of Arts, undoubtedly comprise factors that could make this goal possible.

The existence of a Research Unit, named IHM-UP, the Institute for Early Modern History – University of Porto, that is prepared to provide some logistic and financial support to these studies and goals, and the existence of an established team of academic and young researchers who are already highly familiar with the global features of each port, are furthermore other favourable factors.

At the same time, it is our aim to proceed with a comparative analysis of these dynamics with other spaces, particularly with those found along the Atlantic front all over Europe, which share historical and contextual experiences that are similar to the ones identified in Northwest Portugal, in order to deepen and broaden our investigative approach and to question the possible existence of models in the construction and reconstruction of historical seaport dynamics.

Finally, we think we should not remain closed in our own academic circuits. It is imperative that our research work be made available and useful in public initiatives that could, concurrently, raise the awareness of local public authorities and citizens to the importance of their harbour heritage and global historical memory, and even collaborate with tourism bodies and initiatives, thus further disseminating our knowledge on each seaport and sea town model.

Organizing an exhibition of cartographic representations of NW seaports from the 16th to 19th centuries, holding local conferences on seaport history, involving the entire community; and publishing CD-ROMS with historical tourist circuits, could be three, among others, of these initiatives.

These plans for the future do not however replace the future itself, so we will wait and see what the future holds for the Hisportos team.:::

