Early Modern Ports, 1500-1750

by Cátia Antunes

Ports are the vehicles par excellence for transactions. Since time immemorial, ports have been gateways for the exchange of goods, people and ideas. These exchanges have determined the relevance certain areas have attained in world history by framing global contacts beyond the narrow urban walls of a certain town. Even though Late Medieval and Renaissance ports were situated within the Mediterranean basin, the European expansion overseas and the local competition moved the preeminence of European ports to the Atlantic axis, where Northwestern European cities took over most of the central economic, social, political and cultural role of large metropolises, remaining important nodal points for global interactions until today.

Introduction

From time immemorial, the sea has been a link between states, and ports have been connecting bridges between different peoples and cultures.[1] Ports did not only bring communities closer, they also had particular functions inherent to their position as links to the sea and as connections between different political powers and civilizations. This article will start with the definition of three central concepts when considering ports as objects of historical study, namely, "ports", "hinterlands" and "regions". These three concepts draw the framework within which historians have so far considered ports, their influence and their role in history.

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The article will proceed by exploring the different functions ports acquired in history and how those functions influenced the historical development of each individual port. It will pay special attention to the economic, political, social and cultural functions a good number of ports assumed and which influenced the outcome of their success or failure as global players.

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Ports, hinterlands and regions

When studying the role and influence of ports in history, it is important to understand what historians mean when they write about ports. The concept of the Early Modern port has its roots in the medieval urban tradition. The title of "port" was generally given to towns whose main activity was trade, being located either on the shores of a major river or on the sea. When the role of trade and market activities became important enough to a certain port, those activities would be regulated by the urban authorities or the central government (king).

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During the Early Modern period, the notion of the port was similar. At an urban level, one could distinguish a port from any other type of town by looking at its urban composition. There were three characteristics that marked ports. In the first place, ports had harbors that were the center of the movement of people and products. Secondly, the urban mor-

phology of ports always had particular buildings or spaces that dominated the city, such as dockyards, warehouses, customs houses, open markets, inns and pubs. Finally, ports could also be identified by the particular socio-economic groups that they sheltered. For instance, ports commonly attracted a large number of merchants, bankers, bookkeepers, shopkeepers, shipbuilders and foreigners.[2]

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Even though ports were important as urban structures with a direct link to the sea or via river estuaries, Early Modern ports, like all other towns and cities at the time, were not able to survive without their hinterlands. The primary concept of the hinterland is that of a rural environment that immediately surrounds a port. There is some debate over this definition, though. Medieval historians state that hinterlands were spaces surrounding the ports, but they were also part of the urban structure because the town had jurisdictional rights over them. In practice, that meant that an urban system was composed of both an urban element – the port – and a rural element – the hinterland.[3]

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Early Modern maritime and urban historians have gone further with their definition of hinterland. They agree with the medievalists that hinterlands were often within the jurisdiction of the port, but they stress the idea of the growth of informal hinterlands during the Early Modern period. By informal hinterlands they mean not only the clearly jurisdictional definition given by medievalists, but also the extent to which ports influenced their surrounding space and the extent to which that space influenced the ports. Therefore, for the Early Modern period one has to look at the immediate rural hinterland (jurisdictionally dependent on the port), but also at a larger space that one could call regional, which may include areas of migration and long-distance trade and cultural exchanges.[4] Some argue, going even further, that hinterlands can also have a trans-continental character, especially during a time in which European ports were venturing into overseas enterprises.[5]

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The definition of Early Modern hinterlands and their symbiotic relationship with European ports was paramount for determining the position each port assumed in a specific region and therefore its projection beyond that region, often into the international and global arenas. This approach to the definition of hinterlands denotes an evolution from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern period in which ports and hinterlands became less jurisdictionally attached and more informally linked.

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When considering the development and place of ports in a broader historical context, we rely on two basic theoretical frameworks: the central place theory and the network theory. The central place theory identifies towns as centers for the consumption and commercialization of products coming from the surrounding countryside.[6] These towns would not only function as commercial markets, but also as service providers. The variety and efficiency of these services would mainly depend on the size of the towns. The theory states that small towns with close links to the surrounding agricultural area are placed below the level of larger towns providing more extensive services, which in their turn would be the base for the development of regional cities. The efficiency and diversity of the services regional cities made available would surpass the level of the services other towns had to offer.[7]

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The hierarchical system constructed by the central place theory presents a problem. If one subdivides the services provided by small towns, larger towns and regional centers, one can see that local hierarchies depend on the type of services provided. For example, a small town might have offered a more important agricultural market than a large town, but usually it did not supply financial services, as larger towns or regional cities did. In the final analysis, one can consider a range of services, consisting of several hierarchies each depending on a specific service. This also applies to economic factors, such as capital, labor or markets, to administrative factors, such as law enforcement, public administration or tax collection, or even to cultural factors and technological dissemination.

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The central place theory raises a number of questions and doubts and cannot be considered in isolation. It is necessary to supplement it with other theories. It seems that the best of those theories has been fully developed by Paul M. Hohenberg and Lynn H. Lees.[8] In their survey of Europe's urbanization, they systematically combine a network theory with

a central place system, and thus take the concept of urban interaction a step further.

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Hohenberg and Lees imply that at a lower and middle level of the central place hierarchy there must be a certain degree of cooperation between towns, and specifically between ports. So, instead of accepting their urban role as the result of their geographic position in the hierarchy, Hohenberg and Lees consider that towns and cities need to be analyzed according to their function. Following the authors' arguments, those functions are defined not only by geography, but also by their links to other urban areas. This means that during the Early Modern period ports were in a better position to supply more services, which meant that they could assume the most advantageous position when relating to their hinterland and their urban partners. The more they brought in from the hinterland, the larger became the area under their formal or informal sway, and the more potential they achieved for urban interconnectedness and interdependency.

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One of the consequences of the network theory is that urban connections and interdependencies increased with the growth of the network of interconnected ports. These close relationships made the distribution of all sorts of economic, social and cultural products easier. In the beginning, the range of distribution included mainly material things, such as products and capital. But soon, people (migration) and subjective things like ideas, technological development and information traveled faster and penetrated more deeply than ever before, contributing thus to an ever-growing complexity of the port/hinterland network systems.

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The growing number of services and interactions between ports and their urban counterparts in the direct hinterland, region, trans-national and trans-continental networks gave them a function seen by many as the ultimate sign of the globalizing role ports played in history, namely, functioning as gateways.[9] This role of gateway was especially important when considering the different functions ports had in the Early Modern period, a time in which most large cities were ports and most of them were engaged, in one way or another, in the general movement of European expansion overseas.

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Yet not all early modern ports were large, and not all of them were global gateways. Some of them were forced into a position of a social, economic and cultural "window function" by a strong state in need of contact with the outside world, as was the case with the role St. Petersburg assumed within the orbit of the Russian state.[10] Others, like some small ports in Scandinavia, were used as demarcation bastions of territorial borders in contexts where the competition between opposing central states threatened the integrity of one of them, as happened in the case of Lödöse on the Swedish-Norwegian border.[11]

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Social, Economic and Cultural Transactions

The role ports assumed as gateways during the Early Modern period can be ascribed to the fact that they were urban environments where transactions took place. Those transactions were numerous and mirrored the multifunctional character ports had at the time.

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The most primary and distinct function of Early Modern ports was transactions in goods, commonly referred to as trade, but which went beyond commerce, growing to include all related activities of shipbuilding, bookkeeping and a wide range of services such as notarial registration, credit, insurance and in some cases even the organization of specialized stock exchanges and chartered companies.[12]

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The success Early Modern ports achieved in their role of gateways for products was determined by their position in the trading networks each port belonged to. If some, like Venice (➔ Media Link #ac), Seville (➔ Media Link #ad), Lis-

bon (➔ Media Link #ae) or Cadiz were mainly centers for intercontinental transactions, ports like Antwerp (➔ Media Link #af), Amsterdam (➔ Media Link #ag) or London (➔ Media Link #ah) grew from regional centers into intercontinental powers, thus becoming bridges between the centuries-old European trading networks and the newly-found Atlantic and Asian routes.[13]

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For most ports, the essence of trading relied on the exchange of products in more or less free markets. Therefore, knowledge of production outlets, consumption markets and market behavior was paramount for a thriving port. This knowledge gave information about production techniques, weather conditions, creditworthiness and fashion a value of its own, since the different degrees of information might work for or against a certain port, depending on the timing and amount of information available at a given moment. Therefore, no major international port was able to do well in transacting products if the flows of information were not at least as efficient.[14] The major source of information during the Early Modern period was word of mouth (mostly through personal contact or personal letters), and in some places the press, although the latter was of almost negligible significance. Information traveled with people, and for that reason ports were at an advantage when compared to other types of towns. Since people often traveled with products, and since ports were always an attractive environment for immigrants because of the broad availability of work within the city, or the opportunity to find transport to somewhere else, news was quick to reach most ports.

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If most of the information flows reaching Early Modern European ports were of a practical nature, often linked to trade (news of shortages, prices, weather, wars, embargoes and so on), there was also a flow of intellectual transactions that one may also classify as information. The exchange of written knowledge through the import/export of books, pamphlets and religious written materials positioned ports in the forefront of intellectual exchanges. It is thus not surprising that most ports were more or less tolerant environments for the exchange of unorthodox religious ideas, political concepts or technological developments.

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The growth of the amount of practical and intellectual information within the European networks of Early Modern ports emphasizes the importance that human transactions gained in many of these towns. The spread of manufacturing, services and military activities linked with trade imposed a permanent demand for a fluid and flexible labor force within most European port systems. Often offering a broad range of specialized activities, ports were known to be places where one might earn a relatively higher wage than in other towns and where the permanent availability of work was a constant. These circumstances attracted very significant numbers of immigrants coming from the rural hinterlands, the region or even from the informal hinterlands overseas.[15]

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Rural or urban migration from close by or far away greatly influenced the social composition of most ports, making them extraordinary environments of social interaction, religious exchanges and cultural transactions. That was certainly the case with European ports that received a fair share of slaves imported from the West Coast or the North of Africa, and free Africans, as was the case with Lisbon, Livorno, Liverpool or Marseille.

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If slaves were forced into migration against their will, other groups left their towns of origin owing to religious persecution. That was the case with the Iberian New Christians, often forced into exile by the actions of the Inquisition, or the Huguenots, forced to flee their home towns to avoid religious exclusion. A considerable number of these migrants fled to Northwestern European ports like Antwerp, Amsterdam, Hamburg or London, where they made a significant contribution to the economic, social and cultural life of those ports for more than 350 years.

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Unfortunately, not all Early Modern migrants were successful, and their survival at the port of destination was often hindered by the instability of the labor markets or by economic crises. Very often, the weaker members of the urban agglomerates fell prey to daunting survival challenges. That was the case with all the members of society who for some reason had no place in the traditional family framework, as was the case with single men and women, widowers and widows or orphans. Among these groups, the young and the women were those in the most precarious situation, since

their presence in large anonymous metropolises was often perceived as criminal or morally questionable at best. Often driven by poverty or in need of income owing to exclusion by the charitable institutions of the time, some were forced into pilfering, pick-pocketing or prostitution.

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Even though prostitution was a common feature of Early Modern ports, its perception seems to have been overemphasized by the feelings of the contemporaries. Recent studies have shown that prostitution was often a seasonal activity for most married (and not single) women and was used as to supplement their meager family incomes. These women were often forced into a position of heads of their families owing to their husbands' professions as sailors or soldiers. When their menfolk embarked on their voyages or campaigns, most women were left with part of the men's wages (usually a very small part) and a family to keep. During spring and summer, they were able to find petty jobs in the harbor or as suppliers of logistics for the ships, although autumn and winter were tough times to find a job. Those who could not apply for charity were forced into prostitution. That was certainly the case in most Dutch and English ports in the 17th and the 18th centuries.[16]

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With the large flow of practical and intellectual information and the tolerance that was required to keep most of this flow of information going, ports became safe havens for regional and foreign scholars, intellectuals, clergymen and merchant communities forced to leave their native lands because of their religious, scientific or political belief. With people thus being forced to live together in often small urban spaces, religious, cultural and social tolerance became paramount for the survival of ports as social identities, especially in matters concerning the enforcement of law and order.

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Urban overcrowding was one of the many consequences of the appeal ports had for many immigrants. Although better equipped than other types of towns to survive public health problems resulting from the co-existence of large populations, very often within traditional medieval walls, ports were forced to expand to the outskirts, to create public health regulations to avoid contamination (for example, by excluding polluting industries from within the city walls), to promote poor relief (more often than not through the religious and social organizations such as the churches and guilds) and, at times, even to regulate the access of people through the gates or the harbor of the city, encouraging as a result the development of a "town spirit" through the separation of "citizens" from "non-citizens", a division not drawn by socio-economic lines, but simply by the territorial definition of who inhabited the town and for how long.[17]

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Unfortunately for many, public health regulations and controlled access to towns did not save Medieval, Early Modern and even Modern ports from falling victim to serious epidemics that threatened not only the livelihood of their populations but even endangered their existence *per se*. Although overcrowding imposed serious challenges to town councils, for ports the most dangerous threat came from the sea. The continuous arrival of foreign ships, usually seasonally bound, led to hectic periods around the docks, where surveillance was at times reduced, very weak or non-existent. This allowed the incoming of sick crews and contaminated products, often infected at the port of departure or at sea. Even though sometimes unaware of their health status, foreign ships called at healthy ports, where they stayed for as long as was needed for their business transactions, leaving behind a trail of sickness and pestilence that would quickly spread throughout the city, aided by the overcrowding conditions within the urban setting.[18]

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There was little that inhabitants or city councils could do to avoid the consequences of what might be called negative transactions. However, there were always some resources that could be tapped or some measures that could be taken. For the people that lived in the towns, the obvious choice when plague or disease broke out was to abandon the city for a place in the countryside, often within the jurisdiction of the city, that is to say, in the traditional hinterland. Yet this was a possibility only for those wealthy or healthy enough to be able to abandon the town and leave their activities behind without endangering their daily survival. On the other hand, abandoning the town for the countryside was also only an option as long as the countryside was immune to the spread of the disease. As soon as urban dwellers started to flood the rural areas, disease spread as quickly as if it was still confined within the city walls, leaving the healthy areas for refuge further and further away. While well-to-do individuals had the choice to leave, the less wealthy inhabitants were not able to do so. For them, the city councils had only the choice to make food and water available through

regulation and to oblige religious institutions to bury the dead as soon as possible.

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In order to avoid the mayhem, havoc and economic losses provoked by the spread of disease in ports, many city councils throughout Western Europe applied a set of Roman Laws as regulative measures in the case of ships that had been hit by the plague or coming from areas where the plague was reported. According to this set of laws, the city councils had the right to discriminate against ships and crews that came from certain ports or had been engaged in certain geographical areas. For those, the port was brought under a temporary embargo that was only lifted when the danger had passed (either because there were no cases of disease on board, the quarantine had been successful, or the ship had just left). Although originally used as one of the few weapons against the spread of disease, health embargoes were often used with political purposes in order to bring about the demise of economic competitors. A good example of the way this mechanism was abused was the endless embargoes imposed by Genoa on Venetian ships and vice versa, with each city trying to stimulate its own commercial endeavors in the Eastern Mediterranean to the detriment of the other.

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The strong development of an idea of citizenship allied with the economic power brought by trade and manufacturing activities made most European ports places of intellectual tolerance and political autonomy. Although surviving in the context of growing centralized states, Early Modern European ports were able to negotiate their autonomous position within the political spectrum either by assuming political centrality and becoming capitals, or by re-negotiating medieval charters of privileges that regulated the political exchanges between central powers (kings) and the townsmen (often represented in well-organized city councils in which elements connected with trading and manufacturing activities sat side by side with all the other representatives of the urban social order).[19]

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The key functionality of European ports in general was their ability to create, develop and excel in a broad range of transactions, only possible due to the multiple gateway functions ports were able to assume within the European urban network at the time.

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From local town to global player

Even though most Early Modern ports were wealthy urban environments, not all of them attained similar prominence. The growth and success of ports seem to have followed a clear path of development, with two possible origins and one single outcome. Early Modern ports developed into major metropolises either by gaining momentum when venturing outside their traditional informal hinterland systems or by winning a competition game against their peers at local and regional level.

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Ports like Venice, Seville, Lisbon and Cadiz owe their well-known status to the prominent role they played within a broader and more general movement of expansion overseas by the central states they belonged to (in the case of Venice, the city itself). Venetian expansion in the Mediterranean is all in all comparable to the Portuguese and Spanish expansions in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. The fact that Venice, Seville, Lisbon and Cadiz were able to participate in the exchange of novelties (products, culture, information, knowledge) acquired in regions that went beyond their traditional informal hinterland systems made them pivotal centers of the known world before the mid-16th century.[20]

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Even if the Venetian, Portuguese and Spanish expansion overseas seems to have brought great gains to specific ports, those ports had been poor centers of regional networks, especially when compared with other contemporary ports in Northern Europe. The relatively isolated geographical situation of all of these expanding ports made them dependent on the expansion enterprise. Well aware that their fortunes depended on the success of expansion and conquest overseas, Venice, Lisbon, Seville and Cadiz were prone to support all possible attempts by the central state to augment its influence overseas, all of them becoming pawns in the political and diplomatic exchanges of the time.

The lack of steady and strong regional and trans-regional hinterlands forced the Renaissance and first large Early Modern ports to seek partners within the European context in order to survive as centers of transactions and exchanges.[21] The selection of partners involved not so much ports similar in morphology, but smaller regional ports with good hinterland and regional connections, all of them in Northern Europe. Starting with Antwerp, Amsterdam, Hamburg, the Baltic ports and London, all of them primarily regional ports with good links with their hinterlands and regions, the selection process for partnerships followed the waves of political intricacies and diplomatic agreements.

In order to have a chance to engage with a major southern European partner, most northern European ports had to fight their regional competitors in order to prevail as the main candidates for partnership. This was certainly the case when Antwerp surpassed Bruges and Amsterdam left Middleburg, Flushing, Hoorn or Enkhuizen behind. Hamburg (➔ Media Link #am) was able to beat most of its Northern German and Baltic rivals, and London became the foremost port of the British Isles.

This regional competition, contrary to the expansion methods of the Southern European ports, was fuelled by offering advantages to partners so that they might engage in transactions with an advantageous starting-point. One of the mechanisms used by Northern European ports to attract the exchanges with Southern European partners was creating a set of privileges for products, people and ideas imported from those partners, either by the establishment of factories (as was the case with the Portuguese factory of Antwerp) or by issuing charters of privileges (as was the case with the Venetian traders in London).[22] These mechanisms helped Northern European ports to become the centers of monopolist practices, whose main goal was to control the redistribution networks (formal and informal) of products, people and ideas.

This clear movement of port centrality from the Southern (Mediterranean) into the Northern (mostly Atlantic) European complex has been well documented and explored by Fernand Braudel (1902–1985) (➔ Media Link #an) and others.[23] They argue that there was a clear shift from the Mediterranean to the Northern European Atlantic axis that left most of the pioneering ports of European expansion overseas as peripheral junior partners to large upcoming Northern gateways that were successfully able to combine an inter-continental centrality of informal networks with regional and hinterland prominence within a context of sharp regional competition.

The reallocation of port centrality from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic axis had still further consequences that went beyond the importance of ports as gateways. This shift meant that the importing of products, people, ideas and fashions moved northwards, creating the development of a new set of economic, social and cultural values aided, as Max Weber (1864–1920) (➔ Media Link #ao) would argue, by the religious divide initiated by the Reformation and Counter-Reformation.[24] This general split within the European port system initiated during the 16th century is to be blamed for what many consider the root of the "tiny divergence" (and some would even call it "retardation") between Southern and Northern European countries still to be felt within the European Union nowadays.[25]

Conclusions

Ports were important urban elements in the map of Early Modern Europe. They were the most successful cities of the time, achieving that status by engaging in a whole range of economic, social and cultural transactions that marked their functionality within a certain region. Although the most important ports during the Renaissance period and the 16th century were mainly mono-functional, drawing most of their prominence from their participation in the central state's expansion overseas, the ports of late 16th, 17th and 18th centuries were major gateways for products, people and ideas that were exchanged throughout the world.

The importance of global gateways like Amsterdam or London can be ascribed to their ability to ally a regional role with a trans-continental one, which gave them the capacity to excel as focal nodes within hinterland systems, regional networks and intercontinental exchanges. These metropolises were the engine behind a general shift from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic axis, whereby North Western Europe acquired a different social, political, economic, cultural and religious development from that of Southern Europe, thus creating a division noticeable until today.

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Appendix

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